

38 Lessons on Ezra & Esther

Taught in 2023 at the Fulshear church of Christ

These lessons are presented in chronological order. Lessons 1-15a cover Ezra 1-6, Lessons 15b-31 cover Esther, and Lessons 32-38 cover Ezra 7-10.

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LESSON 1

Why Study Ezra?

We are about to spend a lot of time studying the book of Ezra. Apart from being a book of the Bible and apart from telling us a great deal about God (which are certainly reasons enough to study it in depth), why should we spend so much time studying Ezra?

And, asked more broadly, why should we spend so much time studying this particular period of history involving the exile and the return from exile?

One immediate answer is that we should spend a lot of time on it because God spends a lot of time on it in his word — Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Haggai, Obadiah, Malachi, Ezra, Esther, and Nehemiah.

Another immediate answer to why we should study the exile is that it shows God doing something that he had done before - it shows us God hitting the reset button!

God had earlier done that with the flood, and God did it again with the exile. His people had become so godless and perverted that God sent them into exile to teach them a lesson and to cleanse them. And it worked! We will see how well it worked in our study of Ezra!

And there is a lesson for us there as well. Yes, God opens doors, but sometimes God closes doors. And sometimes when the people of God fail to live as they should, God looks elsewhere for faithful people to do his will on this earth.

Let's look next at 10 more reasons to study the book of Ezra.

Reason 1: The themes of Ezra are themes for us as well.

Anytime we study a book of the Bible verse by verse over an extended period of time, we run a risk. The risk is that we will fail to see how those verses tie

together – that we will fail to see the themes of the book. Not every book in the Bible is like the book of Proverbs, which for the most part would still make perfect sense even if you put the verses in a shoebox and shook it up!

So what are the themes of Ezra? We will consider that question in more detail later, but let's look at a few now.

As we work this book together, we will see that it has three primary themes: the temple, the law, and the wall. And we will see that each of those themes in Ezra has a counterpart for us today.

We will also see two themes about the people of God in Ezra – their continuity with the people of God who came before them and their separation from the heathen nations that surrounded them. And, again, those are important themes for us as well.

We will also see two themes about God on display throughout Ezra as well as Esther – God's steadfastness and God's sovereignty. God is faithful to his promises, and he is steadfast in fulfilling them and working on behalf of his people. And God is sovereign over his creation. Earthly rulers serve God's purposes – whether or not they intend to do so!

Each of these themes has an important message for us, and we need to keep them all in mind as we study this book.

Reason 2: Ezra teaches us why history is important

Ezra teaches us about one of the most interesting periods of time in man's history, and certainly one of the most important periods of time in God's plan of redemption. Absent the events in Ezra, the church could not have been established in Acts 2 according to prophecy. That is how important this book is!

As the handout shows, during the 300-year period from Nabopolassar until Alexander's conquest of the Persians, we see a string of Babylonian kings and then Persian kings surrounded elsewhere in the world by such figures as

Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. With all that was going on in the world, who would have thought that the most important events by far involved a few hundred thousand former captives located in a backwater Persian province? But things are not always what they seem. God's plan was at work, and God does not need the might or wisdom of man to accomplish his plans!

But why should we study all of this history? The theme of the Bible is the redemption of man through Jesus Christ, but that theme is not just a philosophical idea that is disconnected from daily life. Instead, it is developed within the history of mankind – and most of that history centers on the history of one people, Israel.

Over half of the Bible consists of historical narration in which the inspired word repeatedly emphasizes God's role in that history. Thus, to understand Ezra, we must understand its historical context. The study of this history will also provide some modern lessons because the Bible teaches us that the way God works with his people in one historical context, such as the Persian Empire, can help us understand how he works in other contexts.

Yes, Ezra is history – but it is so much more than just history. We need to be sure that we don't miss the big picture in our focus on the historical details.

Marcion lived from around AD 85 to 160. He believed that the actions of God in the Old Testament were incompatible with the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. This view was an outgrowth of the Gnosticism that is roundly condemned in the New Testament. Marcion still has is followers today – those who believe the God of the Old Testament is not the same God we see in the New Testament. I know of a very well-known gospel preacher who left the church for that very reason – he could not reconcile in his mind the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament, and he ultimately concluded incorrectly that they were two different Gods.

Of course, that view is completely wrong. There is one God, and the God we see in the Old Testament is the same God we see in the New Testament. And

the nature of God has not changed. The loving God we see in the New Testament is the same loving God we see in the Old Testament.

We cannot hope to understand all that God wants us to know about him if we fail to study the Old Testament. We can't understand all that God wants us to know about the New Testament without studying the Old Testament. The Old Testament takes up about 3/4 of the entire Bible – that alone should tell us something about its importance in understanding what we need to know about God and his plan.

The church is built not just on the foundation of the apostles, but on the foundation of the apostles and the **prophets** (Ephesians 2:20). The roots of the New Testament are in the Old Testament, and we cannot hope to understand the New Testament without studying the Old Testament. And vice versa – those who try to understand the Old Testament apart from the New Testament have a veil over their eyes (2 Corinthians 3:14).

Ezra teaches us about history – and it is history that God wants us to know about and understand so that we can better understand his love of his people and his love of the world and better understand all that God has done to bless the world through Christ.

Reason 3: Ezra teaches us about fulfilled prophecy.

Predicting things is easy – just ask any weatherman. The difficult thing is to predict something that actually happens, and particularly so when the prediction includes the time frame in which the event will occur.

The Bible does that over and over, and such fulfilled prophecies are perhaps the clearest statement of the inspiration of the Bible. Fulfilled prophecies should cause people with honest hearts to believe what the Bible says about other matters – and leaves those who do not believe with no excuse for their disbelief. Books of the Bible that show God's prophetic power are here for a very important reason – they reinforce the divine origin of this book.

Think about the gospel writers, for example. They repeatedly point back to the Old Testament to show that what was happening was a fulfillment of prophecy. Why? Because that fulfillment showed that what was happening was from God. And, more importantly for our question, it presupposed that the readers of those gospel accounts knew the Old Testament and were familiar with those prophecies. If knowledge of the Old Testament was important then, is it any less so today?

What, after all, is the purpose today of the Old Testament?

Galatians 3:24 – “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ.”

Trying to learn the New Testament apart from the Old is like studying without a schoolmaster. The Old Testament guides us in our study of the New; it explains what we are seeing in the New and why we are seeing it. The Old Testament provides the context for the New. We cannot properly understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. That is why God gave us both.

What prophecies are fulfilled in Ezra? We will consider that question in more detail as we move through the text, but let’s consider two examples now – an immediate example and a distant example (distant as viewed from the time of Ezra).

The immediate fulfillment of prophecy is mentioned in the very first verse. The return of the people to Jerusalem from Babylonian captivity occurred as Jeremiah had foretold – and when Jeremiah had said it would happen.

We talked about these prophecies when we studied Daniel 9. Specifically, the prophecies are:

Jeremiah 25:11 - “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.”

Jeremiah 29:10 - "For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place."

What is this 70 year period? The first deportation likely occurred in 605 BC. If we count out 70 years, we get 535 BC, which is close to the year when the first exiles finally returned to the land. (We discussed this question in great detail in our study of Daniel.)

So, Ezra begins by showing the fulfillment of an immediate prophecy – the return from the 70 year exile.

As for the distant prophecy, we need to go back to Isaiah 2, which was written over 100 years before than Ezra. Isaiah 2:3, in a prophecy about the church, states: "For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." Luke 24:47 tells us the same thing: "And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." And Acts 2 shows this very thing happening as foretold by Isaiah 2.

How does prophecy from Isaiah 2 relate to Ezra? Simple. For the prophecy of Isaiah 2 to be fulfilled the people of God had to be in Jerusalem in the days of the Roman kings – which Daniel 2 tells us is when the church would be established and Acts 2 tells us is when the church was established. They Jews could not stay in Babylon. They could not be scattered to the winds as had happened with the Northern tribes. They had to be in Jerusalem in the first century.

And more than that – the temple had to be around in the first century as well, and when Daniel was written the temple had been destroyed. That meant the temple had to be rebuilt.

How do we know that the temple had to be around in the first century? Because Matthew 24:15 tells us that Daniel had prophesied about the destruction of the temple at the hands of the Romans. Also, John 2:17 tells us that one of the prophecies of Jesus was that "the zeal of thine house hath

eaten me up.” How could those prophecies have been fulfilled absent a temple?

In short, for the prophecies about Jesus and his church to be fulfilled, the Jews had to be in Jerusalem in the first century and the Jewish temple had to be in Jerusalem in the first century. Neither of those things is true when the book of Ezra opens!

One more example of fulfilled prophecy – the book of Ezra is a fulfillment of Isaiah 44:28.

“That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

And that prophecy from Isaiah is one of the more remarkable in the Bible. Why? Because it mentions Cyrus by name over 100 years before he was born.

Josephus says that these prophecies were what caused Cyrus to issue his decree:

“Accordingly, when Cyrus read this, and admired the Divine power, an earnest desire and ambition seized upon him to fulfill what was so written; so he called for the most eminent Jews that were in Babylon, and said to them, that he gave them leave to go back to their own country, and to rebuild their city Jerusalem, and the temple of God, for that he would be their assistant, and that he would write to the rulers and governors that were in the neighborhood of their country of Judea, that they should contribute to them gold and silver for the building of the temple, and besides that, beasts for their sacrifices.”

The Bible tells us that God stirred Cyrus to do these things – perhaps God did that stirring by putting Cyrus’ name in a book written a century before Cyrus was born! That would certainly have stirred me!

Reason 4: Ezra teaches us how to deal with criticism

The book of Ezra shows us how to deal with opposition and criticism. Such attacks in Ezra came both from within and from without.

There are two types of criticism from **within** – that from within the group and that from within the person. Perhaps the most debilitating type of criticism is self-criticism and self-doubt. “It will never work! Who will ever listen to me? Why should anyone listen to me or follow me?” If one adds on top of that the same chorus from one’s fellow workers and from those on the outside looking in, then work will almost always grind to a halt – and we see that happening in Ezra.

Anyone running the race for God can expect Satan to throw up one hurdle after another – and most of those hurdles involve criticism. How should a child of God respond?

First, we should determine whether the criticism is valid. If it is, then the critic has done us a favor, and we should respond accordingly.

Second, if the criticism is not valid, then we should remain focused on our task and not allow the criticism to derail or delay us on that path. Criticism will always be there, and so we should not be surprised by it. Instead, we should expect it, be ready for it, and deal with it.

Again, the book of Ezra gives us some wonderful examples on how to deal with criticism and opposition. It also gives us some examples on how not to deal with criticism and opposition! At times, God’s people allowed God’s plans to get off track due to opposition, and God’s prophets had to encourage them to get things back on track.

Reason 5: Ezra teaches us about restoration

The people returned to Jerusalem with a purpose – to restore the temple. Although it would not possess the splendor it once enjoyed (3:12), both the people and God would be pleased (Haggai 1:4-9).

But it is not enough to restore just the physical, outward forms; hearts must also be restored. Restoring a building is a great undertaking, but restoring the heart is the most difficult task of all. There would be little advantage in having

a wall to defend against enemies if the people inside the wall had corrupt hearts.

The word “restoration” is an important word in the Lord’s church today. It is not (as some teach) because the church of Christ is a product of the restoration movement in the sense that our history **begins** with the restoration movement. It is instead because the church today is a restored church. What do I mean by that?

For many years, the Lord’s church was almost (not entirely, I suspect, but almost) completely absent from this world having been lost in a sea of religious error and confusion. Eventually, some began to turn from that religious confusion and turn instead to the Bible to determine what God wants from his people. And, in doing so, the church of the New Testament was restored by following the pattern laid out in that New Testament.

Did the history of the church begin with that restoration? Obviously not – the word “restored” points us back to something earlier, and that earlier thing was the church established in Acts 2.

That first century church is what was restored, and the fact that we are a part of that church today after it was almost non-existent for so many years is what I mean when I say that the church today is a restored church. (And we should thank God every day that it has been restored, and we should thank God every day for the preservation of his word that allowed us to know what had to be done to restore the church.)

That history of the church – from loss to restoration – is the history of Ezra. The restoration in Ezra does not involve the restoration of the church – the new Israel – but rather it involves the restoration of the temple and the restoration of proper worship for the old Israel.

If we want to understand the importance of restoration – and of the constant need for us to continually compare what we are doing with the pattern in the Bible – then Ezra is the perfect place to start.

Is restoration of the church today a **continuing** activity? Yes and no.

Some people who say that restoration is a continuing activity do so to argue that the church is just another denomination, and that all denominations are on the road to restoration, and that we may just be a bit further ahead than some of the others on that road. I completely reject that notion for at least two reasons.

First, I reject their premise. I see no evidence that any of the denominations are on the road toward a restoration of the divine pattern for the church. If any are, then that is good – but they will have to abandon their denominationalism if they want to follow God’s pattern. It has happened before – most of the leaders in the restoration movement came out of denominations – but the key phrase there is “came out.” You cannot be a part of a denomination and be pleasing to God. Division is not God’s pattern for the Lord’s church.

Second, I reject the idea that restoration is a continuing process in that sense because the restoration movement was a success. The church was restored, and members of the church of Christ today are members of the same church that we see in Acts 2. In that sense, restoration is not a continuing activity but is rather a completed activity.

But, if by continuing activity we mean only that we must be constantly vigilant to compare what we are doing with the pattern in the Bible, then yes, restoration is a continuing activity in that sense.

And restoration is not just a corporate activity. Christians must do more than just compare what we do in worship with the pattern of the Bible – we must also compare our own lives to that pattern. Jesus left us the perfect example to follow, and we should always be comparing what we do with that perfect pattern.

Whatever it is that we are trying to restore, Ezra shows us how to do it – we must return to the word of God. If we look anywhere else, then our attempts at restoration will fail.

Reason 6: Ezra teaches us about the church

It is easy to become discouraged when we look at the sad state of many congregations of the Lord's church. Women are assuming leadership roles; musical instruments are entering the worship service; elders are disappearing; baptism is being watered down. But Ezra has a message for us, and it is message of purity, proper worship, continuity, and restoration. The message of Ezra is a message we need to hear. It is a message of encouragement for the faithful remnant.

A major focus of the book of Ezra is the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem following its destruction many years earlier by Nebuchadnezzar.

When the New Testament opens, the rebuilt temple is in Jerusalem (with some major additions built by Herod). When the New Testament ends, the temple is once again destroyed, but something infinitely better has taken its place – the church. Is that something we see in Ezra?

Yes, we see that in Ezra, we see that in prophets long before Ezra (Isaiah), we see that in prophets shortly before Ezra (Daniel and Ezekiel), and we see that in prophets contemporaneous with Ezra (Haggai and Zechariah).

Do you mean that the prophets foretold the destruction of the very temple that was being rebuilt at this time? Yes, and for an example, let's look at Haggai 2.

Haggai prophesied during the time of the book of Ezra, and in fact Haggai is mentioned by name in Ezra 5:1 and 6:14.

In Haggai 2:6-7, we read:

“For thus saith the LORD of hosts; Yet once, it is a little while, and I will **shake** the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will **shake** all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts.”

And then turn to Hebrews 12:26-29 –

“Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I **shake** not the earth only, but also heaven. 27 And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are **shaken**, as of things that are made, that those things which **cannot be shaken** may remain. 28 Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which **cannot be moved**, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: 29 For our God is a consuming fire.”

And what is this “shaking” in Haggai 2 and Hebrews 12 describing? Turn to Matthew 24:29 –

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be **shaken**.”

Verse 34 of Matthew 24 confirms that verse 29 is describing a **first century event** – the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem in AD 70.

And what replaced that temple? Hebrews 12:28 just told us – “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved.” Verse 27 tells us that the church cannot be shaken. That immovable unshakable kingdom of Hebrews is the indestructible kingdom of Daniel 2:44 –

“And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever.”

This rebuilt temple in Ezra was never intended to be permanent, but rather would be replaced by something that was permanent and indestructible and immovable – the church of Christ.

The church was established in Acts 2, and the Jewish temple was destroyed about 40 years later in AD 70, just as Jesus had described in Matthews 24.

LESSON 2

Reason 6: Ezra teaches us about the church (continued)

To see something else that Ezra teaches us about the church, we need to look at Ezekiel.

Daniel, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah lived at the same time, but only Daniel and Ezekiel were exiled to Babylon – Jeremiah stayed behind. And while Daniel lived in the king's palace, Ezekiel lived and prophesied among the exiles.

Ezekiel 37 begins with one of the most amazing and well known prophecies in the entire Bible. Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley filled with human bones that had been dried, bleached, and scattered.

In verse 3 Ezekiel hears a question that must have seemed preposterous to him: "Son of man, can these bones live?" But Ezekiel's answer in verse 3 indicates his appreciation for God's power. "O Lord GOD, thou knowest."

God tells Ezekiel to preach to these dead, dry bones, and Ezekiel obeys despite the apparent absurdity. He tells the bones to hear the word of the Lord! (Whenever we are tempted not to proclaim God's word because we think we already know our audience's response – remember Ezekiel! Did any preacher ever have a deader audience?)

Ezekiel's obedience produces immediate results. Even before he finishes, Ezekiel hears the noise of the bones coming together and being covered by flesh. They stand up as a vast, living, reconstituted army.

In verses 11-14, God interprets the vision for Ezekiel. This vision was God's response to the people's feeling of hopelessness. "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

Can these bones live? Can a dead and powerless nation in exile and under the control of a godless nation be resurrected and become a living, thriving kingdom once again?

God's message was that the nation would live again; the people would settle again in their own land; and, the people would know that it was God who had brought them back to life.

Starting in verse 15 of Ezekiel 37, we find a sequel to the vision of the dry bones.

Ezekiel was commanded to perform a symbolic action. He took two sticks and identified them with inscriptions denoting the two former kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Ezekiel then made **one stick** of the two by holding them together. Through this symbolic action Ezekiel portrayed the reunification of the revived nation.

In verse 18 Ezekiel is asked what this all means, and Ezekiel explains that God was going to join (literally "give") Joseph (the Northern kingdom) to Judah (verse 19). God was going to restore and reunite the nation under one king (verses 18-22). Further, the nation would never again be divided (verse 22) and never again would the people serve idols (verse 23). The restored nation would have David as its king (verse 24). They would be united under one shepherd (verse 24). They would live under a covenant of peace (verse 26). The people would dwell securely forever (verse 25), and a sanctuary would be built among them that would remain forever (verse 26).

Were the people united under one king from the line of David after their return from exile? No – Cyrus and his successors remained their king. Were they restored to one nation? No – the Northern tribes never returned. They remained divided. Were they united under one shepherd? Did they live under a covenant of peace? Did they dwell in the land securely forever? Did the new temple remain forever? No to all.

Those things did not happen when the exiles returned – **but they did happen.** They are all blessings enjoyed by the church. Ezekiel 37 begins by describing the blessings enjoyed by the returned exiles – but Ezekiel 37 ends by describing the blessings that God had in store for the church.

Those prophecies were fulfilled not by the rebuilt temple but by the eternal kingdom that came into being in the first century as Daniel had foretold.

In short, when we study about the return from exile in Ezra we are studying about the church and God’s plan for the church. There is no other way to read Ezekiel 37. The return from exile and the church are intricately intertwined.

The return from exile in the days of Ezra was just a small foretaste of what God had in store for his faithful people. The fullness of God’s plan would come five centuries later when the eternal king came into this world as a “babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)

We must not study Ezra in a vacuum. We need to keep in mind all else that God tells us, both about what was happening at that time, and about what God was doing at that time to prepare the way for Christ and the kingdom of Christ.

Reason 7: Ezra teaches us about separation

There is a strong emphasis in Ezra on separation from any form of defilement with the surrounding people.

The Jews who returned were a tiny island in a great sea of people and religions. It was important that they remain pure in doctrine, customs, and ethics. They needed to be “in the world, but not of the world.”

Some of Ezra’s actions may seem harsh, but those actions show us how important it was in God’s plan that his covenant nation continue. The people had been carried into exile because they broke the covenant, and Ezra did not want that to happen again.

This time was a crucial turning point in the history of the Jewish people. The northern tribes had dissolved into the world; would that happen to Judah? Unchecked assimilation with their neighbors would have meant the end of their role in God's plan.

The church needs to hear this message today. We know that we cannot completely separate ourselves from the world "for then must ye needs go out of the world" (1 Corinthians 5:10). We must be in the world to preach the gospel to the lost. But the command of 2 Corinthians 6:17 remains: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you."

One way in which we are called to be separate from the world is the same way that the exiled Jews were called to be separate from the world – they were told to be separate from people who claimed to worship the same God, but who did not worship God in spirit and in truth.

Listen to what the exiles heard from their neighbors in Ezra 4:2 and ask yourself if we hear similar questions today: "Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do."

And the response? Verse 3 – "Ye have nothing to do with us." That response might seem unloving or un-neighborly to some, but it was, of course, the proper response as the remainder of Ezra shows again and again.

Ask yourself how the book of Ezra would have turned out had Ezra opened the doors wide to all who claimed to seek God as they did. Ezra knew that claim was false. How? Because Ezra knew the law of God, and Ezra knew those neighbors were not following the law of God. Their disobedience put the lie to their claim to seek God as Ezra did.

The church of Christ is distinctive. And when we quit believing that or quite teaching that, then we will cease to be the one church that God wants us to be. We are not just another church on the block! We are the eternal kingdom

of Christ promised in Daniel 2 and established in Acts 2. The “church of Christ” is not our name; it is our description. We are the Lord’s church.

Reason 8: Ezra teaches us about scripture

Ezra repeatedly affirms the centrality of the Law of God in the life of God’s people.

God’s people love and follow God’s word. And one of the clearest ways to see those who are **not** God’s people is to see how they treat (or rather mistreat) the word of God.

The revival in Ezra started with those who “trembled at the words of the God of Israel” (Ezra 9:4; 10:3). Ezra calls the people back to “the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given” (Ezra 7:6). Ezra repeatedly says that the people acted “in accordance with what is written” (Ezra 3:2-4; 6:18).

Perhaps more than anywhere else in Scripture, the book of Ezra the Scribe shows us the power of God at work through written texts.

In Ezra 7:25, King Artaxerxes writes to Ezra and says: “And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, **that is in thine hand.**” What was in Ezra’s hand? The law of God, which is the wisdom of God. Is it in our hands?

There is a crucial lesson here, especially for us today. Why especially for us today? Because we are losing our ability to read.

What do I mean by that? Obviously, I do not mean we are becoming illiterate. What I mean is that we as a society are losing our ability to read deeply. To read and study a written text to understand what it means. And why are we losing that ability?

Think for a moment about Twitter, which has been in the news a lot lately. What does Twitter teach us about reading?

“First: you shouldn’t focus on any one thing for long. The world can and should be understood in short, simple statements of 280 characters.

Second: the world should be interpreted and confidently understood very quickly.

Third: what matters most is whether people immediately agree with and applaud your short, simple, speedy statements. A successful statement is one that lots of people immediately applaud; an unsuccessful statement is one that people immediately ignore or condemn.”

That is not the way to study the Bible or teach the Bible.

Bible study requires time and depth. We need to slow down and focus on the text. We need to stop and think about what we are reading.

And the most important truths will most often be unpopular when they are first heard. The popularity of our message should not be our guiding principle.

So am I saying that social media is changing us? Yes, that is what I am saying. It is changing us, and not for the better.

The proportion of Americans who never read a book in any given year tripled between 1978 and 2014. Some 57 percent of Americans now do not read a single book in a typical year. As of 2017, the average American spent seventeen minutes a day reading books and 5.4 hours a day on their phone.

One thing Ezra teaches us is that God’s people are a **reading** people. We cannot be the people God wants us to be if we approach God’s word the way we approach Twitter or Facebook. God’s word demands depth, and time, and focus — and our society is quickly losing all three of those things.

And I am not saying this as an anti-technology Luddite who wants us to all go back to Kerosene lamps and dusty books. I am saying this as someone who has three degrees in electrical engineering. We can use these tools for God, but we need to use them in the right way, and we need to be aware of their dangers to our spiritual well-being.

Reason 9: Ezra teaches us about worship

Worship is central in Ezra and also in Nehemiah. When the first group of exiles returned from Babylon, they first built an altar to sacrifice to God; only afterwards did they build the temple. Still later they built the walls. Worship was their top priority.

“In an age of experienced-centered, clap-happy worship and entertainment-orientated evangelism the books of Ezra and Nehemiah direct our thoughts to a holy God who demands reverent worship and uncompromising loyalty from his people.”

The temple was vital to the Jewish people. Why? Because it was a symbol of God’s presence and because it was a reminder that they were to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

When the temple was completed, the people celebrated with a large dedication service, where they “offered a hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred male lambs and, as a sin offering for all Israel twelve male goats” (Ezra 6:17). Soon afterward they celebrated the Passover. Then when the city wall was complete another great celebration was held (Nehemiah 12:27-13:3).

Worship plays a central role in Ezra. The people wanted to worship, they loved to worship, and they celebrated when they were able to worship God once again in the way that he wanted to be worshipped.

Their desire to protect the purity of their worship explains their emphasis on separation.

If I ever see worship as a dull, boring affair – then I need to study Ezra. By studying Ezra, we may see worship in a new light.

If we were suddenly unable to worship here because we had been dragged off into exile somewhere – and if one day we were able to return here and worship again – what would that worship service be like? Would we perhaps return with a new appreciation for the blessings we enjoy when we worship God at this place?

And our worship should be a delight to us!

C.S. Lewis: “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance.”

The exiles experienced that delight when they first returned.

Did the exiles’ excitement in worship last? Sadly, no, at least for many of them. The delight and the excitement seem to have faded for many.

Malachi preached to the people not long after Ezra and Nehemiah returned, and here is how he described the people’s view of worship in his day:

“Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it.”
(Malachi 1:13)

Where do we fall on the scale between those who longed and loved to worship and those who snuffed at worship?

John 4:24 – “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”

Spirit alone is not enough, and truth alone is not enough. We must worship in spirit and in truth, and Ezra provides some wonderful examples of proper worship.

Reason 10: Ezra teaches us about faith

The book of Ezra shows us what faith can accomplish.

Through faith the temple was rebuilt. Although there were obstacles, eventually God granted them success. We see in Ezra many great examples of faith. In fact, we will see that, as does Hebrews 11, Ezra includes its own roll call of faith.

Here is what one commentator had to say about Nehemiah, but it also applies to Ezra.

“Today there are many problems in the Lord’s church. Commitment to truth seems to have diminished among those in whom it once appeared to

be strong. Many are saddened at the apostasy of some churches and brethren and the wishy-washy attitude of others. Historically God's people have endured such challenges and discouragement. The way out is through faith. God is not unaware of the problems or those who often feel alone in upholding His ways. If faithful churches and brethren focus only on the problems, it will result in shrinkage and more loss. In addition to meeting the challenges that false brethren pose, we must continue preaching the Gospel to all the world, restoring the pattern, and trusting in God's providence. As those of Nehemiah's day, we need to use one hand to hold a sword (to defend against error) and use the other hand to build the wall of the church (each new convert being a living stone). God will grant success."

So there are many reasons to study Ezra, and not just these 10! We could give many more reasons as well. Ezra has many vital messages for God's people of any age and time.

Where Are We and How Did We Get Here?

When Ezra opens, God's people are living in Babylon under a Persian king. How did they get there? We need to answer that question before we can fully appreciate what was involved in getting them back to Jerusalem.

We considered this question when we studied Zechariah, and we considered it again when we studied Daniel, so we won't spend as much time on it as we would if this were the first time we were looking at this history.

At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Babylon had conquered Israel and carried Daniel and his friends into captivity. By the end of that book, the Babylonian kingdom was gone, and Medo-Persia was in control.

Daniel had prophesied about four earthly kingdoms – Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome – that would be swept away by the eternal kingdom, the church.

Our studies in Ezra and Esther will center on the second earthly kingdom in that list: Medo-Persia. All of the events in Ezra and Esther (and also in Nehemiah) took place during the time of the Persian Empire.

Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. Jerusalem was destroyed, many of the Jews were killed, and most of the others were carried off to Babylon. After Nebuchadnezzar's death in 562 B.C., the empire declined rapidly.

The Medes and the Persians were Indo-European tribes who moved south from Russia. First they settled in the northwestern part of Iran but later they migrated further south. The Medes occupied the western part of Iran south of the Caspian Sea, while the Persians moved farther to the southeast to part of Iran just north of the Persian Gulf.

The Persian kings were called the "Achaemenids" (a-KEY-muh-nids) after the founder of the dynasty, Achaemenes, who was followed by Teispes (Cispis). We have record of two branches of Teispes' family. One son, Cyrus I, ruled from 640 to 600; and his son, Cambyses I, ruled from 600 to 559. Cambyses I was the father of Cyrus the Great. After the reign of Cambyses II, who followed Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great took over the throne. But he was from the other branch of the Achaemenian family, through Teispes' other son, Ariaramnes.

Until the time of Cyrus the Great, the Persians were vassals of the Medes. But eventually, Cyrus was named king of a combined Medo-Persian kingdom in which the Persians were dominant. We looked at how that all came to be in our study of Daniel.

Babylon had reason to fear the growing empire to the north. Cyrus quickly marched across Upper Mesopotamia, conquering Armenia, Cappadocia, and Cilicia; then he defeated Croesus, king of Lydia, in 547, gaining control over the Greek cities in Asia Minor. He then conquered more territory in the east into what is now Afghanistan; so the Persian Empire reached from there to the western shores of Asia Minor. It was only a matter of time before Cyrus would take over Babylon.

In 539 Cyrus ordered one of his officials to attack Babylon, and the city was quickly taken.

Herodotus tells us that the Persians were able to enter Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River, which ran through the city, into an artificial lake, thus lowering the water level enough for the soldiers to enter the city and take the Babylonians by surprise.

Daniel 5 described how Belshazzar fell from power suddenly one night while he was banqueting.

Xenophon corroborates this. He said the Persians attacked the city during a festival when “all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.”

Herodotus wrote: “The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses.”

Many of the Babylonians looked upon Cyrus as a liberator. The Jews were also optimistic about the potential political change because of how Cyrus was known to treat those he conquered.

The Assyrians had been very cruel. They had harshly suppressed the peoples they conquered; many times they had moved entire populations from one land to another and then replaced them with other conquered peoples. This is what they had done when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

The Babylonians, although somewhat less cruel, followed much the same policy. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., many of the Jews were taken captive to Babylon.

When the Persians took control, however, Cyrus encouraged the peoples he conquered to develop their own culture and continue their own religion. He and some of his successors even helped support the local priests in conquered nations. After conquering Babylon, he restored the place of Marduk as their principal god and allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands.

We know much about Cyrus from the famous Cyrus Cylinder – a clay barrel with a long inscription in cuneiform writing honoring Cyrus. It is mainly concerned with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and was written to influence public opinion in his favor and legitimize his rule over Babylon.

It is a long inscription that first tells of the misdeeds of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Then Cyrus continues:

Marduk ... scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him ... to become the ruler of all the world.

The cylinder also tells us how Cyrus treated the gods of the people he conquered:

I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy.

As we will see, the resettlements in Jerusalem came from a similar pronouncement that we will read about in Ezra.

One key difference is that, rather than returning an image, Cyrus returned to the Jerusalem temple the precious vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken.

The Persian Empire now included all of Babylon and Syria-Palestine. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Cyrus’s son Cambyses II conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., making the Persian Empire greater than its predecessors.

In 522 Cambyses II received bad news from Persia: someone impersonating his brother Smerdis had taken over the Persian government. Cambyses had earlier ordered his brother murdered so this would not happen.

Cambyses hurried back to Persia. But according to Herodotus, on his way through Syria, “as he was springing into the saddle, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh.” Cambyses died three weeks later.

Meanwhile at Susa the usurper was killed by a group of seven conspirators. Darius, one of the seven conspirators, was named king. This was Darius the Great. Under him the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and most efficient organization. (This is **not** the Darius of Daniel 6:28.)

Darius left many inscriptions telling about his exploits. The longest and most famous is the Behistun Inscription carved on a huge rock formation on the main road that led from Mesopotamia to Iran. The inscription was carved on a cliff, 225 feet above the plain. It also includes reliefs of Darius, his officials, and his subjects. In the carved image, Darius has his foot on the imposter he replaced.

It was during Darius’ reign that the construction of the temple in Jerusalem was resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6). As we will see in Ezra 4-5, the Jews’ work on the temple had been halted because of the opposition of their neighbors. Cambyses apparently had supported the opposition – and isn’t it interesting that he died unexpectedly while “springing into the saddle”!

In Ezra 6, the Jews informed Darius that Cyrus himself had authorized the building of the temple. Darius searched the archives, found that it was true, so he again authorized the construction and commanded the opposition to cease.

At the same time, in 520 B.C., God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who told the people that they should renew the work on the temple. The people responded, God removed the opposition, and the temple was dedicated in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:16-18).

LESSON 3

The Politics and Decline of Persia

The political organization of the Persian Empire was different from that of Assyria and Babylon. The whole Persian empire was divided into 20 satrapies, each of which was governed by a commissioner or satrap, usually chosen from the Persian noble families. These satraps were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the king.

The satrapies were further divided into provinces, which were each supervised by a governor, usually a descendant of the local nobility. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah served as governors.

Palestine belonged to the satrapy called "Beyond the River," which means the region west of the Euphrates. According to Herodotus, this was the fifth satrapy, and it included Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Palestine to the border of Egypt.

During Darius' reign, the Greek settlements in Asia Minor rebelled against the Persian Empire. They were brought under control, but Darius then attempted to take the Greek mainland. He was defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), son of Darius, had served as viceroy over Babylon for 12 years under his father's rule. His great ambition as king of Persia was to conquer Greece. After quelling revolts in Egypt and Babylon, he began his Greek campaign in the spring of 480 B.C.

After initial successes, conquering the northern part of the Greek mainland and burning the acropolis in Athens, Xerxes' forces suffered a naval defeat at Salamis, which led to his withdrawal from Greece. The events of the Book of Esther took place during his reign.

The plot by palace officials to assassinate Xerxes in the book of Esther, which Mordecai uncovers, may have been a result of Xerxes' humiliating defeat in Greece.

Although Mordecai had saved Xerxes from one palace plot, his reign of 20 years was ended by another such plot. The captain of his bodyguard plotted to take over the throne and assassinated Xerxes in August of 465. Xerxes' oldest son was then murdered by his younger brother, Artaxerxes I, who became the next king of Persia.

The final century of the Persian Empire before its fall to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. was characterized by revolts and economic decline. Increasing taxation and the greed of government officials were factors in the growing impoverishment of the people.

The Jews in Exile

The situation of most Jews in Babylon appears to have been good.

Only King Jehoiachin and his family, captured in 597 B.C., were confined; and they were released in 562 B.C. Most of the exiled Jews were free to settle in communities and to engage in normal agriculture and trade.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many of the exiled Jews preferred to remain in Babylon.

During the captivity, the Jews lived among a foreign population and were naturally influenced by that environment. The most important influence was the Aramaic language. During the captivity, Aramaic became their principal spoken language. Babylonian influence is also seen in names such as Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

After carrying away the Jews, the Babylonians did not bring other peoples into Judah as the Assyrians had done in the north after the fall of Samaria.

What that meant was that a population vacuum was created in Judah. Archaeological excavations indicate that Judah was sparsely populated in this period. Except for the Negev and along the northern frontier, virtually all the fortified towns in Judah had been destroyed.

Since the time of Joseph, Jews had frequently looked upon Egypt as a place of refuge, although they were repeatedly admonished by the prophets not to seek security in Egypt. Some of the Jews migrated to Egypt following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C, and another group left Judah for Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jeremiah 41:16-18).

This flight to Egypt is supported by the famous Elephantine papyri. This collection of fifth century B.C. papyri was from a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in the Nile. The site was a frontier outpost on Egypt's southern border occupied by Jewish mercenaries and their families. It was apparently founded sometime in the sixth century, perhaps soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. The papyri, consisting of legal documents and letters, date from the fifth century B.C. and reveal much about the political situation and about Jewish laws and customs there.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah, we read of neighboring enemies of the Jews. Judah was surrounded by other provinces, all part of the fifth satrapy we mentioned earlier. Samaria was the province on the north where Sanballat was governor. Ammon-Gilead was the province on the east where Tobiah was governor. Arabia-Idumea was on the south where Geshem was governor. On the west was the province of Ashdod. We will have much to say about these neighbors as we study the book of Ezra.

The Role of Time in the Book of Ezra

With its very first words, the book of Ezra rivets the text to the line of time: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia..." At each successive turn of events, Ezra gives us temporal markers.

In all, more than 40 time markers are given in the book of Ezra, and the book ends with yet another temporal pinpoint, “And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month” (10:17). Beginning, middle, and end – every part of the book of Ezra shows a careful attention to time.

But, at the same time, the inclusion of all these dates in Ezra creates something of a problem. Since dates are characteristic of a book of history, and because we expect a book of history to unfold itself in chronological order, we might expect that the book of Ezra should unfold itself in just the sequence that things happened. But it does not.

See the handout.

After covering nearly 100 years (with some gaps) of post-exile history in 1:1-4:23 (539–445 BC), without skipping a beat Ezra jumps back 75 years to 520 BC in 4:24 and picks up the account of the temple’s completion where he left it in 4:5.

With the rebuilding of the temple complete in 515 BC (4:24–6:22), an almost offhanded “after these things” transports the reader forward over 57 years of largely undisclosed history and lands him in 458 BC, the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:1, 7).

The book also adopts a variable **pace** in the telling of this history – sometimes moving moderately, sometimes at a gallop, other times inching genealogically name by name. In contrast to the first six chapter’s 100-year span (539–445 BC), the last four chapters cover only a single year (458 BC).

We will look at these issues when we get to them in the text, but for now, here are the questions for us: Is this odd treatment of time part of the message of Ezra? If so, what is it telling us?

Let’s look at the three chronological anomalies that are shown on the handout.

Timing Anomaly 1

The first temporal anomaly occurs between 4:23 and 4:24, where the text switches from the time of Artaxerxes back to the time of his grandfather, Darius the Great.

The first two chapters of Ezra recount Cyrus' decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and the people's return from exile. Chapter 3 begins with the exiles (or, more specifically, the children of the exiles) gathering in Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month of Cyrus' reign to restore the altar and reestablish proper worship.

Roughly two years later, Jeshua and Zerubbabel stir up the people to lay the foundation of the temple and commence its reconstruction (3:8-10). After refusing their neighbors' request to help rebuild the temple, the Jews faced about 15 years of organized opposition and resistance until the reign of Darius.

Work on the temple was stopped until it was restarted in 520 due to the preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. The temple was completed in 515 BC.

But we find more than that in Chapter 4.

In verse 6, we learn that during the reign of Xerxes (Ahasuerus) (486–465) (34 to 55 years after the temple was completed) the Jews' enemies lodged another complaint against them.

And then starting in verse 7 of Chapter 4 and continuing through verse 23, the text records two examples of opposition that occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (465–424) (55 to 96 years after the temple was completed). The second of these two examples resulted in an imperial decree stopping all building activity on the city walls.

Up until verse 23, the text has followed a strictly chronological line, but with several gaps. All of the temporal signposts in Ezra have been pointing forward up through verse 23, but that changes in verse 24.

Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The reappearance of Darius' name lets us know that time has been warped, and what was long past is present again.

The 35-year gap between 4:5 and 4:6 is abruptly reopened, and 4:24 along with Chapters 5 and 6 fill that gap with a description of the temple's completion during the reign of Darius — which occurred prior to the events in 4:6-23.

Why does Ezra tell us about opposition to the building of Jerusalem's **walls**, opposition that happened years after the rebuilding of the temple, before he tells us how the temple was rebuilt?

To appreciate the significance of the text's order, I think we need to recognize the effect it has on the reader.

As the reader moves into chapter 5, it appears that the troublemaking neighbors of the Jews had won, and that the Jews were in for another beating. But that is not what happened. Instead, as we will see, Darius gave his support to the Jewish efforts, and that support from the king radically altered the dynamics of the situation.

Darius' decree in Chapter 6 transformed the reconstruction from a beleaguered effort to an imperially supported project with both resources and authority. What we find in Chapter 6 is a great reversal (which, by the way, will be a central theme of Esther).

So why does Ezra give examples of later oppositions before showing this great reversal of the first opposition?

I think the closing verse of Chapter 6 answers that question:

6:22 - And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

(Why is the king of Persia called the king of **Assyria** in that verse? We'll get to that later!)

The point of verse 22 is that God was behind that great reversal of fortune, and the reason that Ezra tells us about the later oppositions is to remind us that God will take care of those problems as well.

This reversal in Chapters 5 and 6 is the key turning point in the first half of the book.

Ezra's audience is living in the aftermath of the heavy-handed enforcement of Artaxerxes' decree to stop all work on the city walls (4:23). They had been prospering under Artaxerxes' favor and had been actively rebuilding Jerusalem when their enemies successfully turned the king against them, which must have caused great sorrow.

A big part of the book of Ezra is to revive the people's hope for the future by looking back at how God had caused his people to triumph over the prior persistent opposition.

Ezra 4:6-23 is inserted as a parenthetical between 4:5 and 4:24 for one reason - to provide hope for the people of Ezra's day. What God had done in the past, God would do again in the future.

The text is ordered in a way that creates hope for the future.

How do others deal with this chronology issue?

Radical critics use the strange chronology to denounce the entire book.

Torrey describes the book as a chaotic jumble of temporal fragments, misaligned and incomprehensible.

Batten argues that multiple edits of the book have left it "very badly arranged."

But these critics have numerous problems.

First, and most important, they reject the inspiration of the text, and they treat the book of Ezra as simply a product of man.

Second, they treat the book of Ezra solely as a history text (which one might expect to be chronological) and not also as a theological text (which might rearrange things to make a theological point, as I believe Ezra does).

Third, these liberal critics are arrogant. If Ezra didn't order the text as they would have ordered it, then Ezra must be at fault.

Others try to maintain a forced chronology by renaming and rearranging the various kings.

Josephus is the best example of this. According to Josephus's account, the "Artaxerxes" (Xerxes) of Ezra 4:8–23 was Cambyses, the son of Cyrus. This identification smoothes out some of chapter 4's chronological challenges, but it does not account for the "Ahasuerus" in 4:6.

The best view is that Ezra departs from a strict chronological order on occasion to make an important theological point.

Timing Anomaly 2

A second related temporal anomaly occurs in Ezra 7:1.

As we have already seen, Ezra 1-6 covers events from Cyrus' first year in 539 up until an event in the reign of Artaxerxes.

Chapter 7 introduces the second half of the book with the words:

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia...

Clearly Ezra intends to establish a sequence of events. The events of chapters 7–10 are said to follow "these things." But to which "things" does Ezra 7:1 refer?

Two mutually exclusive options are possible.

The first and simplest view takes the narrative words at face value and assumes that all the events of Chapters 1–6 precede the events of Chapters 7–10.

We know from Ezra 7:7 that Ezra 7 begins in the 7th year of Artaxerxes, so, historically, this view would mean that sometime within the first 7 years of Artaxerxes' reign, the Samaritans finally succeeded in shutting down the Jewish building operation, which is what is shown in 4:7-23. Under this first view, all of that must have occurred before the 7th year of Artaxerxes in Ezra 7.

The second (and I think better) view is that the phrase “after these things” refers to the events of Chapters 5-6, but **not** to the events in the parenthetical of Chapter 4 in which Ezra moved far ahead in time to make his theological point.

Why do I have favor the second view?

Chapter 4 does not tell us expressly when in the days of Artaxerxes the events in 4:7-23 occurred, but it does contain an important clue.

The letter sent to Artaxerxes in 4:8-16 states in 4:12 that certain Jews had come up “from thee to us.” The only recorded migration from Babylon to Jerusalem during the reign of Artaxerxes prior to the one led by Nehemiah is the one led by Ezra.

We know from the description in Chapter 4 that the letter precedes the devastated condition of Jerusalem's walls and gates that were reported to Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:3.

What that all means is that, most likely, the migration in verse 12 is the one led by Ezra and that the events of 4:8–23 all took place after Ezra's return but before Nehemiah's arrival.

That creates a problem if all of the events in Chapters 1-6 (including the letter describing Ezra's return) have to take place before Ezra 7. Why? Because Ezra 7 tells us about Ezra's return, which means any letter describing that event

must have been written after Chapter 7 rather than before Chapter 7. If our view of Chapter 4 is correct, then the events in 4:7-23 occurred after Ezra 7 (but before the book of Nehemiah), as shown on the handout.

Why does God order things this way?

We have already looked at one reason — hope. God wanted to give hope to the people of Ezra’s day by showing them how he had solved problems for his people in the past.

But I think we can say more than that in view of Chapters 7-10.

The book of Ezra has a wonderful structure. Ezra’s return in Chapters 7–8 parallels the return of Chapters 1–2. The **external** problems and resolutions of Chapters 3–6 parallel the **internal** problem and resolution of Chapters 9–10.

By moving the opposition of Chapters 7–10 to an earlier point in the text, Ezra isolates all the former exiles’ **external** problems to Chapters 1–6 so that he can direct the reader’s undivided attention to the most serious problems faced by God’s people – **internal** problems.

Many likely believed that the primary problems they faced were **external** such as, for example, the efforts by their neighbors to halt the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls.

But Ezra knew that **external** opposition was **not** his people’s main problem. Returning to Jerusalem, renewing worship, rebuilding the altar and the temple – Ezra knew that all of those external aspects were vain without worshipers whose hearts were pure and whose lives were obedient to the law. Disobedience would ruin them as surely as it had their fathers.

Why had the people been carried off into exile in the first place? Was it because of their **external** problems or because of their **internal** problems? 2 Chronicles 36:16 tells us why they were in captivity.

But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets, till the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, till there was no remedy.

The exile happened because of **internal** problems. God wanted to focus the reader of this book on the danger of **internal** problems. We need to hear that same lesson.

The greatest dangers facing the church today are not coming from outside but from inside – and that is not a new phenomenon. Even at a time when the external challenges were, perhaps, as their greatest level, Paul warned the Ephesian elders about the grave danger of internal problems in Acts 20:29-30.

It is easy to talk about those people out there, but we need to heed the message of Ezra and make sure we focus first on our own hearts. If our hearts are right with God, then there is not an external problem anywhere that can defeat us. That is the message of Romans 8:38-39.

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Timing Anomaly 3

A third chronological anomaly occurs in Ezra 6:14. Having confirmed the authenticity of Cyrus' decree, Darius ordered that the Jews be given all necessary funds and supplies for rebuilding the temple. Ezra describes the results of Darius's decree this way:

Ezra 6:13–15 - And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and **Artaxerxes** king of Persia. And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

The unexpected appearance of Artaxerxes' name in 6:14 momentarily jolts the reader forward into the time of Ezra, immediately raising a big question: Why is Artaxerxes mentioned along with Cyrus and Darius when they had both died

before he was born? Why is Artaxerxes listed as a co-contributor to the building of the temple, which was completed in 515 BC, when Artaxerxes did not even begin to reign until 465 BC?

The answer is simple: the inclusion of Artaxerxes' name in 6:14 brings into one verse all the Persian kings who contributed to the temple – from its initial rebuilding to its final beautification – and it stresses God's sovereign control of history.

This verse summarizes all that has transpired in the process of rebuilding the temple and it anticipates, by mentioning Artaxerxes, what is yet to come.

Also, Ezra explicitly attributes the successful completion of the temple to the command of God first and then to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes. The Persian decrees were merely extensions of the sovereign will of God.

Summary

So far we have looked at three departures from a strict chronological timeline in the book of Ezra, and what we have found is that each was done for a reason. Each was done to stress a major theme of the book of Ezra: (1) The theme of reversal; (2) the theme of the danger of internal problems; (3) the theme of the sovereignty of God; and, (4) the theme of God's gracious goodness.

We will see each of these themes as work through the text, but I find it very interesting that these themes are also evident from just the structure of the book.

LESSON 4

Ezra and Nehemiah: Who Came First?

A very hotly debated topic when it comes to the book of Ezra involves the relation between Ezra and Nehemiah: who came first – Ezra or Nehemiah?

In Ezra and Nehemiah, it appears that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the 7th year of King Artaxerxes (Ezra 7:7-8), and Nehemiah arrived 13 years later in 445 B.C., the 20th year of Artaxerxes (Nehemiah 2:1).

But some commentators have argued that dating Ezra's arrival **after** Nehemiah's arrival makes more sense of the historical data.

I believe the traditional dating (shown on the handout) of 458 B.C. for Ezra's return and 445 B.C. for Nehemiah's return is the correct view, but because there is so much controversy on this issue, I think we should pause a moment to consider it.

The traditional date for Ezra's coming to Jerusalem is based on the understanding that Ezra 7:7-8 is referring to Artaxerxes I. But some argue that the king referred to in Ezra 7 is actually Artaxerxes II, which would then date Ezra's arrival in 398 B.C., long **after** Nehemiah.

Others argue that the "the seventh year" in Ezra 7:7-8 should read "the thirty-seventh year," which was 428 B.C. Unlike the previous view, this view does allow some overlap of Ezra with Nehemiah, but as with the previous view it also places Ezra after Nehemiah on the timeline.

Why do some argue that Ezra must have arrived later? Three primary reasons:

(1) the apparent lack of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah;

(2) the 13-year gap between Ezra's arrival in Ezra 7 and his reading of the law in Nehemiah 8; and

(3) the identity of the high priests associated with Ezra and with Nehemiah.

Let's look at each of those supposed problems.

The first problem arises from the fact that the book of Ezra does not mention Nehemiah at all and the fact that Nehemiah mentions Ezra in connection with himself only three times.

But there is nothing particularly remarkable about this silence. Haggai and Zechariah were contemporaries, yet neither mentions the other. And Jeremiah and Ezekiel were contemporaries, yet neither mentions the other.

Also, the absence of Nehemiah in the book of Ezra should not be surprising at all because Ezra closes his book prior to Nehemiah's arrival in Jerusalem.

And, as for Nehemiah mentioning Ezra in connection with himself only three times, Nehemiah actually mentions Ezra a total of 9 times in his book. Those who complain about an absence of cooperation between Ezra and Nehemiah need to sit down and read Nehemiah.

As for the second problem, the 13-year hiatus between Ezra's arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law in Nehemiah 8 is not the problem that many make it appear to be.

In the first place, silence in the text is not evidence of inactivity.

Also, the language of the report regarding the mixed marriages in Ezra 9:1–2 reflects a knowledge of the Mosaic law. Whether Ezra taught the law publicly, privately, or not at all between his arrival and his first recorded public reading of the law has no bearing on whether he preceded Nehemiah.

The third problem is a little more complicated than the first two. Here are the facts:

(1) In 458 BC, Ezra is said to have entered the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib (Ezra 10:6).

(2) In 445 BC, Eliashib is the high priest when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 3:1, 20).

(3) Around 410 BC, according to the Elephantine papyri, someone named Jehohanan was high priest.

From this evidence it is argued that Ezra must have returned when Jehohanan was high priest, which would have been after 410.

But this argument is based on nothing but conjecture. The Biblical text simply states that Ezra made use of Jehohanan's chamber.

Eliashib was high priest at least from the time of Ezra's arrival through the time of Nehemiah (458–445). Eliashib's son Joiada succeeded him (Nehemiah 12:23). Upon Joiada's death, Jehohanan, Eliashib's other son, assumed the high priesthood (Nehemiah 12:22).

If each of these men was high priest for at least twenty years, Jehohanan could have been a young man at Ezra's arrival and the high priest fifty to sixty years later.

The better view by far is that Ezra preceded Nehemiah, with Ezra arriving in 458 and Nehemiah arriving in 445.

Did Ezra write the Books of Moses?

It's a shame that we have to consider this question, but a widely held view among liberal commentators is that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem with a Book of the Law that was much larger and more elaborate than anything known before.

They argue that Ezra, along with other priests and scholars, collected and modified various laws and traditions and blended them with some books already known and basically wrote what we now call the books of Moses. Under this view, the reason the people were not familiar with the law was because it had not existed prior to when Ezra wrote it and read it to them.

Of course, this view is completely wrong. Why am I so certain of that? We could list about 1000 reasons, but Nehemiah 8:1 should be reason enough:

“And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.”

The people understood perfectly what it was that was being read to them – “the law of Moses, which the Lord has commanded to Israel.” It was not the law of Ezra or the law of Nehemiah – it was the law of Moses. And the source of that law was not Ezra or Nehemiah or even Moses – it contained what the Lord had commanded to Israel.

A major theme of Ezra is **continuity**. The returning exiles were connected to the Jews who had earlier been carried off into captivity. They were returning to rebuild and **restore** what they had once enjoyed. They were not a new people, and they did not have a new law. They were the same people of God that Moses had led from Egyptian captivity long before, and their law was the same law that God had given to Moses long before.

Ezra 7:6 – This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had prepared his heart to **seek** the law of the LORD, and to **do** it, and to **teach** in Israel statutes and judgments.

Did Ezra write the law? No. Ezra 7:10 tells us that Ezra **sought** the law, **did** the law, and **taught** the law. Ezra did **not** write the law.

Who wrote Ezra?

This is a complicated question, but not a question that we will spend much time on. Ultimately, the Holy Spirit is the author, but, of course, we know that inspiration is not dictation, and so it can be helpful to understand the background of the human author through whom the book was transmitted to us.

The book of Ezra includes some first person descriptions:

Ezra 9:3 - As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.

But Ezra also contains some third person descriptions:

Ezra 7:8 - And Ezra came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king.

Ezra may have written both, using first person in Chapter 9 to relay a sense of immediacy, and using third person in Chapter 7 as more of a historical text.

Or Ezra may have written the first person portions, and another author may have written the third person portions. A compiler may then have combined them into the book we now have. There is nothing heretical about this view, of course. However the book was put together, we know the ultimate source of each word and letter is the Holy Spirit. The book of Psalms, for example, is a compiled book.

We know that some compilation occurred no matter who the author was because the book of Ezra, as we will see, contains the text of some historical documents written by Persian kings.

Some have proposed that the books of 1st and 2nd Chronicles were written by the same person who wrote or compiled Ezra, and there are some connections between Ezra and those books. In fact, the closing verses of 2 Chronicles relay the same decree from Cyrus that we will see in the opening verses of Ezra.

Ezra 1:1

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

At this point, many commentaries begin to tell us about Ezra's "theological interpretation of events." That is, they tell us how Ezra and the Jews interpreted the events around them in terms of their theology.

The underlying thought behind such comments is that, while Ezra may have viewed the events that way, the events actually had another explanation. That is, such commentaries look to theology merely as the way that Ezra interpreted what was happening, but not as an explanation for what was happening.

For example, while verse 1 says that God caused Cyrus to make this proclamation, these commentaries say that was just how Ezra saw it, but in reality Cyrus was acting on his own.

This view, of course, must be rejected. If God's word tells us that God caused Cyrus to issue this proclamation, then that is not just how Ezra viewed what happened – that is what happened.

And to those who argue otherwise, I would pose a question. Why did Cyrus issue such a decree? In fact, as we know, he issued other such decrees for other captive peoples. Why? What caused Cyrus to take an approach to captives so different from what had come before? Or should we ask **who** caused him to do so? Ezra 1:1 answers that question. And is that really so hard to believe? Remember that God referred to Cyrus by name long before he was born! But, of course, the liberals reject that as well.

What we see here is the providence of God working on behalf of his people – and that is a central theme of Ezra. God preserved the covenant people during the exile, and God fulfilled his promise and brought his people back to their homeland – and God did these things using the rulers and nations of the world as tools.

“Behind this opening verse lies the affirmation that all the might of the ancient world was in subjection to God, and put at the disposal of his people for their salvation.”

Verse 1 makes it very clear that what Cyrus did was not just a coincidence. Instead, God caused Cyrus to act in a way that fulfilled specific promises. Jeremiah 25:11-12 and Jeremiah 29:10 had foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years and then God would fulfill his gracious promise

to bring them back to this place. Remember from Daniel 9 that Daniel was reading Jeremiah when he realized that the 70 year time period was about to be completed.

The Hebrew word translated “stirred up” in verse 1 is a crucial link to the numerous prophecies in the Bible about this event. It is the same Hebrew word that we find in Jeremiah 51 and in Isaiah 41 and 45.

Jeremiah 51:1 - Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will **stir up** the spirit of a destroyer against Babylon.”

Jeremiah 51:11 - “Sharpen the arrows! Take up the shields! The LORD has **stirred up** the spirit of the kings of the Medes, because his purpose concerning Babylon is to destroy it, for that is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance for his temple.”

Isaiah 41:2 - Who **stirred up** one from the east whom victory meets at every step? He gives up nations before him, so that he tramples kings underfoot; he makes them like dust with his sword, like driven stubble with his bow.

Isaiah 41:25 - I **stirred up** one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun, and he shall call upon my name; he shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay.

Isaiah 45:13 - “I have **stirred him up** in righteousness, and I will make all his ways level; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward,” says the LORD of hosts.

And here are the most remarkable prophecies of all:

Isaiah 44:28 - Who says of **Cyrus**, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’

Isaiah 45:1 - Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to **Cyrus**, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

Those are two of the most amazing prophecies in the Bible. God called Cyrus by name before he was born, and God foretold exactly what Cyrus would do – build my city and set my exiles free! And that is exactly what Cyrus did!

Can there be any doubt who stirred Cyrus up to do those things?

As we mentioned, Jeremiah foretold that the Babylonian captivity would last 70 years. What were the beginning and ending points for that 70 year period?

Let's start with what they are not.

If we start the captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and end it with the first return in 538, then we have a period of only 50 years, which cannot possibly be right.

If instead we take the same starting point but take the end of captivity as the year when the temple was completed (515), then we have a period of 73 years.

Another possibility is that the period begins with Babylon's defeat of Assyria in 610 and ends with the first return in 538, which again gives a period of 73 years. (Some argue that Jeremiah 29:10 refers to the period of Babylonian rule, which would support a starting point of 610 BC.)

Finally, if we start with the first captives (which included Daniel) in 605 and end with the first return in 538, then we get a period of 68 years. This final option seems most likely to me.

Should we be concerned that we don't have an option that gives us exactly 70 years? Not at all.

First, except for the first theory, they all round to 70 years, and we know many of the numbers in these books are rounded.

Second, what does exactly 70 years mean anyway? Down to the month, to the day, to the second? Would 70 years 364 days still be a fulfillment, while 70 years 365 days would not? There would be no end to such a requirement.

Third, God may have shortened the 70 year period to 68 years in his mercy. If so, it would not be the last time.

Matthew 24:22 - "And if those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect those days will be cut short."

Fourth, dating these events is not an exact science. We could easily be off by a few years on some of them.

As an aside, the famous prophecy of 70 weeks in Daniel 9 was discussed at length in our lessons on Daniel, along with what relation, if any, those 70 figurative weeks have to these 70 literal years.

The proclamation in verse 1 was given in the first year of Cyrus, which the context confirms must be the first year of his reign over the Jews in Babylon, which most date in the spring of 538 following his defeat of Babylon in the fall of 539. This famous edict of Cyrus in verses 2-4 also appears in Ezra 6:3-5 (in Aramaic and with some differences) and in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23.

The final phrase “to put it in writing” in verse 1 is significant.

The word translated “writing” refers to writings or inscriptions that were intended for the public eye. This edict was not just announced orally, but was also displayed publicly in writing. It is not hard to imagine the Jewish captives crowding around to read it!

Also, the fact that it was in writing will turn out to be crucial to the later events in this book, and it is also the first occurrence of a theme in Ezra — writing! We will see other things in this book that depend upon what is written. And we should keep in mind that Ezra was a scribe.

Ezra 1:2-4

2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. 3 Who is there among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he is the God,) which is in Jerusalem. 4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

The first thing we notice about this decree is the apparent piety of Cyrus.

It sounds as if Cyrus is a true believer in the God of Israel, but was he? It is very unlikely – although it is certainly possible, at least for a time, particularly if he was shown the prophecies of Isaiah giving his name long before he was born.

Josephus tells us that Cyrus was shown those prophecies and that Cyrus was eager to fulfill them. Some historians cast doubt on that notion, but doesn't it seem likely that the Jews would have rushed to show the new king his own name recorded in their Scriptures – and then to tell him what God said Cyrus would do?

Another explanation for Cyrus' apparent piety is that the Jews had a hand in writing the proclamation. In other such decrees we know that Cyrus used the language of the people who were involved, likely as a diplomatic courtesy. Cyrus likely commissioned native scribes to compose the decrees.

Also, we sometimes forget that other ancient peoples were not monotheists, and, as a polytheist, Cyrus would be glad to have any and all gods on his side.

Later we will discuss the Aramaic version of the decree found in Ezra 6:3-5.

It is often said to be the same decree found here, but there are some differences. The most likely explanation for the differences is that we have two decrees, with the one here being the royal proclamation announced throughout the kingdom and the one in Ezra 6 being a message to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for building the temple.

The phrase "let him go up" in verse 3 should be understood as permission or encouragement but not as a command. The Jews were not being ejected from the country; they were free to decide whether to go or to stay.

And for most of the Jews, this was likely not an easy decision. Those who returned were choosing hardship and suffering, beginning with the 4-month journey required for the return to Jerusalem. But, even so, the decision was made easier because they had a purpose: "to rebuild the house of the Lord."

Although verse 4 is a little ambiguous, it seems to be an encouragement to those that remained behind to provide assistance to those who were about to return to Jerusalem.

Here is the ESV of verse 4.

And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.

How did this encouragement of monetary assistance get into the decree? Perhaps God stirred Cyrus to put it in there, or perhaps it shows that the Jews had a hand in the drafting of the decree. Or perhaps Cyrus just wanted to minimize his own expenses!

Who is the “survivor” in verse 4? What had been survived? Some argue that these are the survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem, but I think the better view is that they are the survivors of the exile in Babylon who now want to return to Jerusalem (or, for most, go to Jerusalem for the first time). Verse 4 is encouraging those who remain behind to provide assistance to those who are leaving for Jerusalem.

We see another theme in these opening verses - the temple. The house of God is mentioned five times in the opening chapter: three times in the opening four verses, and two more times later in Chapter 1.

As we said, these people were returning with a specific purpose in mind. They wanted to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship in the temple. Would they be successful? Would they face any challenges? Would they be stopped? Much of the book of Ezra is an answer to those questions.

So what do we have at the end of Ezra 1:4? What we have is a tremendous open door.

That door was opened by God, as evidenced by God mentioning Cyrus by name long before Cyrus was even born. At the end of verse 4, God has opened the

door wide, and the path is now free for God's people to return to their promised land and restore proper worship. What will happen next?

The first three words of verse 5 will tell us – “Then rose up...” What happens next is that God's people rush through that open door – and we need to do exactly the same thing today when God opens doors for us.

And God is still opening doors! That is what God has always done, and that is what God is still doing today.

“I have set before thee **an open door**, and no man can shut it.” (Revelation 3:8)

“For **a great door** and effectual is opened unto me.” (1 Corinthians 16:9)

Ezra 1:5

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

Verse 5 tells us that those who returned were those “whose spirit God had raised [or stirred], to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.”

The Hebrew word used here is the same that was used in verse 1 to describe how God stirred up Cyrus to issue his proclamation. God was accomplishing his plan of redemption using his own people and using foreign rulers.

And once again we see the goal of the return – to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship. There is an important parallel between this exodus from Babylon and the original exodus out of Egypt. A large part of the book of Exodus (Chapters 25-40) is concerned with the construction of the tabernacle and the establishment of worship. Ezra is largely concerned with the restoration of those same things.

A central message of the Bible is that men must worship God in the manner that God has prescribed. We see that in Genesis; we see that in Exodus; we

see that in Ezra; we see that in the prophets; and we see that in the New Testament.

When men forget that message, a restoration is required – and we saw such a restoration in recent centuries as some left the denominations to restore proper worship and restore the church. We will see many parallels in our studies between these two restorations.

LESSON 5

Continuing with Ezra 1:5

5 Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests, and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem.

As we study the opening verses of Ezra, we need to be on the look out for those themes that will run all throughout the book. So far we have seen two - writing and the temple.

Here in verse 5 we see a third - the continuity between the post-exile Jews and the pre-exile Jews. It was important for the returning exiles to understand their connection with the people who had occupied the land prior to the exile.

Those who returned are grouped in verse 5 under four genealogical headings: Judah, Benjamin, priests, and Levites.

Judah and Benjamin were the two tribes of the Southern kingdom. (The tribe of Simeon was also located in the South, but that tribe was divided and scattered and eventually absorbed into Judah. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:7 that Simeon would be divided and scattered.)

We learn elsewhere that the various returns to Jerusalem also included some Jews from the scattered tribes of the northern kingdom.

1 Chronicles 9:2-3 - Now the first to dwell again in their possessions in their cities were Israel, the priests, the Levites, and the temple servants. And some of the people of Judah, Benjamin, **Ephraim, and Manasseh** lived in Jerusalem:

Two of the categories in verse 5 are priests and Levites. What is the difference between a priest and a Levite?

In short, all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.

Those Levites who were not priests were assigned duties connected with the tabernacle.

Numbers 3:5-8 - And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister to him. They shall keep guard over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall guard all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as they minister at the tabernacle."

Those Levites who were not priests assisted the Levites who were priests, they kept guard over the tabernacles, they prepared the cereal offerings, and they cared for the courts and the chambers of the sanctuary.

Back to our text, another thing that we see in verse 5 is that while God's work requires determination and faith, it also requires planning and preparation and progress toward a specific goal.

The idea of a return to Jerusalem was wonderful, but absent planning, preparation, and goals that idea would have accomplished nothing.

What was the goal here? The immediate, realizable goal was the construction of the temple, but we know that God had additional longer term goals in mind.

There is, of course, a lesson here for us. God's people should never just wing it. We must be a prepared people and a goal-oriented people. We have a mission to accomplish, and that mission will not be accomplished absent our planning and our preparation. **Failing to plan is planning to fail!**

We won't meet Ezra until Chapter 7, but when we get there, here is what we will find.

Ezra 7:10 – For Ezra had **prepared** his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

Ezra prepared himself for the tasks that God wanted him to accomplish. And what was the first step in Ezra's preparation? He opened the word of God.

We, like the exiles, need to be a prepared people!

Ezra 1:6

6 And all they that were about them strengthened their hands with vessels of silver, with gold, with goods, and with beasts, and with precious things, beside all that was willingly offered.

Verse 6 seems to have in mind more than just the **Jewish** neighbors of those exiles who returned, and, if so, we see yet another parallel between the first exodus from Egypt and this second exodus from Babylon.

Those who left Egypt also took with them supplies from their **Egyptian** neighbors.

Exodus 3:21-22 - And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and when you go, you shall not go empty, but each woman shall ask of her neighbor, and any woman who lives in her house, for silver and gold jewelry, and for clothing. You shall put them on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.

So, in addition to help from Cyrus and help from God's own people, God was stirring up all of those who remained behind (both Jew and non-Jew) to provide assistance to those who were returning.

God was using everyone to accomplish his plans, whether they knew it or not. And this is another parallel with the first exodus as we recall how God used Pharaoh and the Egyptians to accomplish his plans for his people.

Ezra 1:7

7 Also Cyrus the king brought forth the vessels of the house of the LORD, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought forth out of Jerusalem, and had put them in the house of his gods;

It is very significant that verse 7 tells us that **Cyrus** brought forth the vessels.

When a king captured a nation, he would take that nation's idols and religious objects to his own capital to symbolize the victory of his gods over the gods of those he had conquered.

Nebuchadnezzar had carried the temple articles away to Babylon in 587.

2 Kings 24:12-13 - ...The king of Babylon [Nebuchadnezzar] took him [Jehoiachin] prisoner in the eighth year of his reign and carried off all the treasures of the house of the LORD and the treasures of the king's house, and cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which Solomon king of Israel had made, **as the LORD had foretold.**

And when had that been foretold? Hezekiah had displayed the temple articles to Babylonian emissaries a hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar took them.

2 Kings 20:12-13 - At that time Merodach-baladan the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he heard that Hezekiah had been sick. And Hezekiah welcomed them, and he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armory, all that was found in his storehouses. There was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them.

Before we read further, does this seem like a smart thing for Hezekiah to have done? No, and Isaiah is quick to tell him so.

2 Kings 20:14-19 - Then Isaiah the prophet came to King Hezekiah, and said to him, 'What did these men say? And from where did they come to you?' And Hezekiah said, 'They have come from a far country, from Babylon.' He said, 'What have they seen in your house?' And Hezekiah answered, 'They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.' Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord: Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon. Nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who shall be born to you, shall be taken away, and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.' Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, 'The word of the Lord that you have spoken is good.' For he thought, 'Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days.'

That last verse is a classic! Who cares if I have brought calamity to the land if that calamity occurs long after I'm gone! Hezekiah should run for Congress!

Unlike Hezekiah, we need to work and plan today, not just for the people of God today, but also for the people of God tomorrow. What will this building and this property be used for 100 years from now? Part of the answer to that question depends on how we use it today.

Jeremiah describes the burning and looting of the temple in Jeremiah 52:12-23, and part of the reason for why that happened can be traced back 100 years

earlier to the actions of Hezekiah. Likewise, what we do today ripples forward in time. Continuity works both ways!

Look today, for example, at once faithful congregations of the church that have gone astray. How did that happen? I suspect we could trace the large deviations back to small deviations many that occurred many years earlier — small deviations that perhaps at the time were not viewed as all that serious.

That King Cyrus himself now returned these same objects to the Jews shows how serious he was in respecting their religion and customs. The parallel decree that we will see later in Ezra 6 specifically mentions that these objects were to be returned to the temple in Jerusalem.

We also saw these vessels in Daniel 5 when Belshazzar, a **Babylonian** king, and his friends were using them in a drunken feast while they praised their false gods and idols.

Now we see the vessels again, but this time being returned by a **Persian** king stirred by God to do so.

The return of these vessels is important to several of the themes we will see in this book.

First, they are important to the theme of the **temple** and its restoration. Not only was the building being restored, but the items within the building were being restored as well.

Second, the returned vessels were important to the theme of **restored worship**. Not only was the temple being rebuilt, and the items within it being replaced, but those items were being used in worship as God had originally intended, which was primarily to deal with the proper disposal of sacrificial offerings (Exodus 38:3; Numbers 4:14). And when we see that and think of the perfect sacrifice that was yet to come, these temple vessels take on even more significance.

And third, the returned vessels were important to the theme of **continuity**. The returning Jews were connected to the Jews who had been carried off. In fact, the temple vessels they now had were the very same vessels that their ancestors had used prior to the exile. We will see another reminder of this theme in the next verses.

Ezra 1:8-11

8 Even those did Cyrus king of Persia bring forth by the hand of Mithredath the treasurer, and numbered them unto Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah. 9 And this is the number of them: thirty chargers of gold, a thousand chargers of silver, nine and twenty knives, 10 Thirty basons of gold, silver basons of a second sort four hundred and ten, and other vessels a thousand. 11 All the vessels of gold and of silver were five thousand and four hundred. All these did Sheshbazzar bring up with them of the captivity that were brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

Mithredath the treasurer in verse 8 was probably the senior Persian financial officer in Babylon. Both the name and the title are Persian rather than Hebrew. The name is derived from “Mithras,” the Persian sun god.

Sheshbazzar in verse 8 was a Jew with a Babylonian name. Although Sheshbazzar quickly disappears from the scene, he led the first group of returnees back to Jerusalem.

The description “prince of Judah” in verse 8 has been used by some to argue that Sheshbazzar was of the royal line of David, but elsewhere in the Bible the word “prince” is used simply to denote a leader. (See 1 Chronicles 2:10, for example.)

Verse 8 shows us how carefully the temple objects were treated – the treasurer “counted them out” to Sheshbazzar.

This careful treatment by the Persians is very different their treatment by the Babylonians, who drank from the temple vessels in Daniel 5.

Who was Sheshbazzar?

The relation between Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel (the leader we will meet in the next chapter) is not entirely clear.

In Ezra 3:8 we read that Zerubbabel and others began the work of building the house of God, and in Haggai 1:1 Zerubbabel is called governor of Judah. Zechariah 4:9 says: “The hands of Zerubbabel have laid the foundation of this house.”

But, Sheshbazzar is called governor in Ezra 5:14, and Ezra 5:16 says, “This Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God in Jerusalem.”

So, both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are called governor, and both Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar are said to have laid the foundation of the temple.

How do we explain this?

These verses have caused some to suggest that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel were the same person, but that does not seem likely and is not required by these verses. The foundation could have been laid by more than one person, and they could have each been governor at different times.

The most likely explanation is that Sheshbazzar was governor at the beginning and Sheshbazzar started the foundation, and then Zerubbabel became governor after Sheshbazzar died and Zerubbabel completed the foundation.

The evidence suggests that Sheshbazzar was the leader and governor when the first group of captives came. We see that here in verse 8, and we will see that again in Ezra 5:14.

Sheshbazzar disappears from the scene quickly, and Zerubbabel, who accompanied Sheshbazzar to Judah and who led in the building project, followed him as governor. We see that in Nehemiah 12:1 and Haggai 1:1.

We also saw Zerubbabel in our study of the book of Zechariah. The crucial fact about Zerubbabel from that study was that Zerubbabel was of the royal line of King David. That fact made Zerubbabel a vital link in God's plan of redemption.

And, in fact, we find Zerubbabel and his father Shealtiel in both the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1 and the genealogy of Christ in Luke 3. But, when you look at those genealogies, you will find that Shealtiel has a different father in each, and Zerubbabel has a different son in each! How do we explain that? Stay tuned! We will get to those questions in the next chapter.

What are all of those vessels in verses 9-10?

Commentaries differ on the meaning and uses of the various items listed in verses 9 and 10. Many of the words used here are Persian loan words.

As we have said, the gold dishes were likely the vessels used to collect the blood of slaughtered animals. The word translated "knives" in the KJV and "censers" in the ESV is uncertain and may have been the knife used in the ritual slaughter of the animals.

The mathematicians among us may have noticed that the numbers of items in verses 9 and 10 do not add up to the total in verse 11. The total number of the articles listed in verses 9-10 is 2499, which is less than half of the total of 5400 given in verse 11. Why the difference?

The short answer is that we don't know, but there are a few possibilities.

1. It is possible that the articles listed in verses 9-10 were those taken by Nebuchadnezzar and returned by Cyrus, while the total number in verse 11 includes the articles donated by those who remained behind (verses 4 and 6). But, as we will see in a moment, this explanation involving new vessels does not fit well with the reason these vessels are listed here in the first place.

2. A very common view is that verses 9 and 10 list only the most important or the largest items, while verse 11 gives the total of all items. A possible problem with this view is the catch-all category in verse 10 – "a thousand other vessels"

– but that could mean a thousand other important vessels or large vessels. A point in favor of this view is 2 Chronicles 36:18, which speaks of “all the vessels of the house of God, great and small.”

3. For another possible explanation, if we look at verse 10 we find the following expression – “silver basons **of a second sort** four hundred and ten.” Apparently, the Hebrew word translated “second sort” here is close to the Hebrew word for 2000, which might mean that in the original version this verse recited 2410 silver basons instead of only 410 silver basons. But that would still leave us with a problem because then the list would total to 4499 instead of 5400. But, numbers are easy to transpose when copied, and if that happened here by some later copyist, then the total in verse 11 might have been 4500 instead of 5400 – and 4499 rounds up to 4500. Thus, under this theory, the original version recited 2410 silver basons, with a total of 4500 in verse 10. That is not my favorite explanation, but it is a possibility.

4. A final possibility comes from noticing all of the Persian loan words that appear in this inventory. Those Persian words may suggest that this list came from an official inventory maintained by the Persian treasurer mentioned in verse 8. If so, then perhaps the inventory was not a complete list, and the number of items handed over to the Jews was greater than the number listed on the Persian inventory.

My preference is the second explanation. The inventory covers only the largest vessels; the total count at the end includes both small and large vessels. And perhaps the fourth explanation is also correct, with the official Persian inventory ignoring the smaller vessels.

It is interesting to note one thing that did **not** accompany the exiles back to Jerusalem – the ark of the covenant.

It may have been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, although Ethiopians will tell you today that it currently resides in their cathedral in Aksum, having been stolen from Solomon by the son of the Queen of Sheba!

My **opinion** is that God took the ark back before it could be destroyed by the Babylonians. Some point to Revelation 11:19 as support for that position – “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple” (although we need to be cautious that we not lift that figurative reference out of its proper context).

Of more concern to us than the numerical problem is the question of why this list is included here at all. What was the point of including this list?

One commentary suggests that the purpose of the list is to stress that **all** of the vessels had been returned.

But there is a problem with that view. We know that not all of the vessels were returned. 2 Kings 24:13 tells us that some of the vessels were cut up into pieces by Nebuchadnezzar, presumably those that were too large to transport otherwise. Also, additional vessels would be transported to Jerusalem later, as we will see in Ezra 7:19.

I think a better view is that what we see here with this list is yet another reminder of a key theme in the entire book – the theme of continuity.

These were the **same** vessels that had been taken away long ago. These vessels, which verse 7 tells us had been brought forth out of Jerusalem, were now, as verse 11 tells us, being brought from Babylon unto Jerusalem. They were the **same** vessels – and I think that is the key point here.

Those people who now returned were connected with those who had been taken. They were connected by families, and they were connected by the items they carried back with them. The exile had not created an irreparable breach – a restoration was possible.

The mention of these vessels also provides further confirmation of the prophecies of Jeremiah, who was mentioned in verse 1. In Jeremiah 27:16, Jeremiah had told the people not to listen to the false prophets who said that the vessels of the Lord’s house shall now shortly be brought again from

Babylon. Instead, in Jeremiah 27:22, Jeremiah said the vessels would remain in Babylon until the day that God visited them.

Jeremiah 27:22 - They shall be carried to Babylon and remain there until the day when I visit them, declares the LORD. Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place.

That is what we see happening right here in Ezra 1.

That short phrase at the end of verse 11 – “when the exiles were brought up from Babylonia to Jerusalem” – is one of the most important events in the history of the world.

It certainly would not have been seen as such at the time (perhaps not even by those who were returning), and it is certainly not seen as such by most today, but mankind is a poor judge of the momentous. We tend to amplify that which is trivial and denigrate that which is important.

We must always strive to see things as God sees them, and, when we do, we will see that the great news events of our own day are not that great at all. The truly momentous events are taking place right here among us as we work in the kingdom of Christ.

What is more important to God – the events that take place in this building or the events that take place in the US Capital building? The discussions and decisions that take place here or the discussions and decisions that take place in the Supreme Court chambers? Intellectually, we know the answers to those question – but do we really believe it? Do we really see the Lord’s church as God sees the church?

One way to see the church as God sees the church, the eternal kingdom of Christ, is to study all that God did to bring about the kingdom of Christ, and a very good place to do that is right here in the book of Ezra.

Yes, from one perspective, all we see here is the return of a small group of exiled Jews to the ruins of their city and their temple, an event ignored by most

at the time and an event that would have undoubtedly been forgotten long ago absent its appearance in the Bible.

But from from God's perspective, what we see here in Ezra 1 is one of the most important and momentous events in all of recorded history. What we see here is an event that was vital to God's plan to bless the world through Christ and to establish the kingdom of Christ in this world. The great powers of the day were important only for how God was using them to further his plans to fulfill his promise to Abraham made long before.

Ezra 2

One of the books in my library is entitled, "How to Enjoy the Boring Parts of the Bible." It might seem sacrilegious to some to suggest that parts of the Bible are boring, but most would likely agree that Ezra 2 is not one of the most exciting chapters of the Bible.

But, as one commentator noted, as uninviting as this chapter may seem, it is a monument to God's care and to Israel's vitality.

If this chapter or any other chapter seems boring to us, then we just haven't studied it enough. We need to look more deeply into God's word, and when we do, we will find that there are great and marvelous lessons to be learned from every verse in Bible.

Why was this chapter with its lengthy list of names included? What value did it have for its initial readers? What value does it have for us?

We have already seen that continuity is a major theme in Ezra, and continuity is a major reason for the presence of this list.

Ezra and his readers were very concerned about the continuity between themselves and the Jews who lived in Judah prior to the exile. They needed to know that God's covenants and promises still applied to them, and they needed to be secure in their own position in the plan of God.

We need to keep in mind that most of these returning exiles had never lived anywhere other than in Babylon. They had not been born when their parents and grandparents were carried off 70 years earlier, and they had never lived in Jerusalem. They needed to know that they were connected to those who had lived here before the exile.

It was also important that they preserve their purity and unity as a people, and that is another theme that we will see in this book.

Another possible reason for the list was to legitimize land rights after the return from exile.

Yes – the Jews had left their homeland. Yes – others had moved in while they were gone. Yes – the Jews wanted their land back when they returned. Yes – those who had moved in did not want to give up their land. And, yes – history has a way of repeating itself!

But there is a crucial difference between the return of the Jews to their homeland under Ezra and the return of the Jews to their homeland under Harry Truman – the former was part of God’s plan to bring Jesus into this world, while the latter was not.

LESSON 6

Last week we started looking at Ezra 2, even though we haven't reached the first verse yet.

When we get to the text of Ezra 2, what we will find for the most part are a lot of hard to pronounce names and a bunch of numbers. As we said last week, some might view Ezra 2 as boring, but I hope that we will see it differently.

When we start looking at the names in this chapter, one thing we will notice is that some of the names are listed by ancestral families while others are listed by geographical location. Why the difference?

Here is where we are starting to see some of the difficulties that arose when people are transported away from their homes for 70 years. One of those difficulties is that memories are sometimes short, and especially when those who returned were the children or grandchildren of those who had left.

Most likely, those in Ezra 2 identified by their ancestors were those who could trace their lineage back to a known Jewish ancestor. They either remembered who that ancestor had been, or they were taught his name by their parents and grandparents. By contrast, those who could identify only their former city did so because that is all they now knew.

So why do we have this strange list in Ezra 2?

We already know one reason - continuity, which is one of the major themes of the book. This list is here, at least in part, to show the continuity between those Jews who were now returning and those Jews who had been carried off 70 years ago.

But is that it? Does this list of strange names have any lessons for us today?

I think we can discover a lesson for us today from this strange list in Ezra 2 by looking at Mark 14.

In Mark 14:9, Jesus, speaking about the woman with the alabaster flask, said, “truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

And, although Mark did not give us her name, that woman is being honored here today 2000 years later for her act of kindness and love to Jesus. Ezra 2 is filled with such people, most of whom are also nameless.

Why did they leave their homes to return to a place of suffering and hardship where most of them had never personally lived?

Why? Because they loved God and longed to worship God as he desired to be worshipped. Because they had faith in God, and they knew God would protect them and guide them. Because they believed the prophets of God and had faith in the plan of God and the providence of God.

And for that they are honored by God in Ezra 2.

And as we read Ezra 2, let’s think about their example. Perhaps we should write Ezra 2 in the margin of our Bible next to the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11.

“To God each individual and family is significant. Thus the group of returnees is not simply lumped together, but valuable space in Scripture is given to otherwise unknown families and individuals. The group of exiles was not large, but it was vital to God’s plan. ... [They are] the heroes of this drama. Through them God’s purposes in Israel were continued.”

It is through this small group and their descendants that we still have the Old Testament Scriptures, which they carefully preserved, and it is through this group and their descendants that Jesus later came into this world.

Even though they were unknown and unnoticed by the world, they were at the heart of God’s plan of redemption.

I fear that the church today often suffers from an inferiority complex. We sometimes feel as if we are of little significance in our modern world.

But we need to see ourselves as God sees us – we are the very center of God’s attention. We are the primary means by which God is fulfilling his plans in this world.

Yes, we are a small group, as these exiles were a small group, but we should remember that God’s people have been a majority in this world only two times: just after creation and just after the flood.

All throughout the Bible we see God using things that are small to topple things that are big. In Daniel 2, it is a small stone that hits the feet of that giant statue representing the kingdoms of this world, toppling it. We are that small stone. We are that faithful remnant today. Ezra 2 shows us that faithful remnant 2500 years ago.

This chapter is about those who returned. What can we say about those who decided to stay behind in Babylon?

Certainly there are some bad reasons for having stayed behind – personal comfort, lack of faith, apathy. But there are also some understandable reasons to have stayed behind – health, family, planning to return later.

In fact, one of the great heroes of faith in the Bible, Daniel, stayed behind in Babylon. Yes, he was in his eighties, but remember that Daniel came out of that lions’ den in his eighties!

Also, the families of Ezra and Nehemiah must have stayed behind as well, along with many other families who returned to Jerusalem in the later returns, including the return we will see in Ezra 7.

My point is that we should not automatically be critical of those who chose to stay behind. If some had not remained behind, then how could the work of Nehemiah ever have occurred?

We each serve God in different ways in his kingdom – and we shouldn’t look down on someone just because he or she is not doing what we are doing.

1 Corinthians 12:14-18 - For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

We each have an important role to play in God's kingdom, but we don't each have the same role to play. I think that is another lesson we find here in Ezra 2.

And with that, let's begin!

Ezra 2:1-2a

Now these are the children of the province that went up out of the captivity, of those which had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city; 2 Which came with Zerubbabel: Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, Baanah.

The key phrase in these verses is the phrase "came again" in verse 1.

This was not a new people going to a new place. This was an old people going to an old place.

That each returned to his own town emphasizes the continuity with the pre-exile group. The returning exiles were claiming their territorial inheritance and reaffirming their roots in and their rights to the land.

The word "province" in verse 1 probably refers to Judah rather than to Babylon.

A big question in the commentaries about Chapter 2 is whether it is describing the first return or some later return.

Verse 63 mentions the governor by title, but does not tell us who the governor was at this time. If we look at our two choices from last week, what we find is

that Sheshbazzar is not mentioned by name in this chapter, but Zerubbabel is mentioned in verse 2.

This has caused some to suggest that Chapter 2 is describing a later return than the one we saw in Chapter 1.

Haggai tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua were in Jerusalem by the second year of Darius (520 BC). And so some suggest that Ezra 1 is describing the first return in 538 BC, and Ezra 2 is describing a later return that occurred some time before 520 BC.

I don't think that is right, and I don't think the text requires us to see a different return in Ezra 2.

I think the better view is to see Ezra 2 as a description of the first return that occurred in 538 BC. Why?

First, we have already seen how important dates are to the author of Ezra, and it would seem odd to suddenly be discussing a later return without any temporal marker in the text.

Second, Ezra 3:1 begins with a temporal marker to the seventh month, which is without any context if it does not refer back to the first year of Cyrus' reign mentioned in Chapter 1.

And third, Ezra 3:8 refers to the second year of their coming, which would seem to suggest that Chapter 2 is describing the first return.

As we focus in on the leaders' names in verse 2, we immediately notice that several of the names are familiar.

Jeshua was the high priest, and he is referred to as Joshua in Haggai and Zechariah. We had a great deal to say about him in our study of Zechariah.

According to Haggai 1:1, he was the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, which would make him the grandson of Seraiah, the high priest before the exile in 2 Kings 25:18.

The name Jeshua means “salvation” and is the Old Testament equivalent of the name Jesus.

We also see Zerubbabel in verse 2. In our study of Zechariah, we looked at both Jeshua, the High Priest, and also Zerubbabel, the grandson of king Jehoiachin.

So close was their partnership, that God through Zechariah used it as a foretaste of the perfect regime that was to come, when priesthood and royalty would be perfectly united in Jesus.

And, as the book of Hebrews tells us, that combination of royalty and priesthood in a single person could happen only under a new covenant because kings came from the tribe of Judah while priests came from the tribe of Levi.

The combined royal priesthood of Jesus is a golden thread that runs all throughout the Bible, from the beginning to the end, and each time we see it, it is a reminder that the Old Law was never intended to be permanent.

Zerubbabel’s role in God’s plan was particularly important.

It was vital that a lineal descendant of King David return to Jerusalem so that one day the King of Kings could occupy the throne of David – which is what Jesus did in the first century.

Luke 1:32-33 - He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Let’s take a quick side-trip on this point. In Acts 1, prior to the ascension of Jesus, his apostles ask him a question.

Acts 1:6 - So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”

What we often hear about that verse is that the apostles were apparently still expecting an earthly physical kingdom, and so once again Jesus had to correct their misunderstanding. But is that right? I don't think so.

First, Acts 1:6 says nothing about an earthly kingdom or physical kingdom, and second, Jesus in response never tells them they have a misunderstanding, but only that they should leave the timing to God.

And there is another problem with what I will call the usual explanation - it seems to ignore what had happened to the apostles between the resurrection and the ascension here in Acts 1. Look first at the third verse of Acts 1.

Acts 1:3 - He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

The apostles asked their question in verse 6 after listening to Jesus speak about the kingdom for 40 days! I don't know about you, but that makes me think that they may have known exactly what they were asking in verse 6!

If they had really asked about a physical kingdom in Acts 1:6 after 40 days of teaching about the kingdom, I think Jesus might have asked them in verse 7 if they had been listening to a single word he said! But Jesus did not ask them that.

And also consider some things we learn in Luke.

Luke 24:27 - And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

Luke 24:45 - Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.

I don't think the apostles were mistaken in any way with their question in Acts 1:6. Instead, they were simply asking about a question about something Jesus had just taught them, and they wanted to know **when** it would happen.

If that is correct, then what does their question in Acts 1:6 mean? "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

Don't we know the answer to that now? Didn't Jesus, in fact, restore the kingdom to Israel when he sat down on the throne of King David and became the first person to do that since King Zedekiah? And isn't that exactly what Peter said happened in Acts 2?

Acts 2:29-30 - Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him **that he would set one of his descendants on his throne**, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.

And remember the prophecy of Amos:

Amos 9:11 - In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; **and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.**

And we also see that same prophecy later in the book of Acts.

Acts 15:15-17 - And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will **build again** the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will **build again** the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

God restored the kingdom to Israel in Acts 2 when God once again placed a king on the throne of David.

We know from other Bible books that Zerubbabel was of the house of David, and the royal link between David and Jesus. But why is that all important connection not mentioned anywhere in Ezra or Nehemiah? The prophets speak about it, but not Ezra or Nehemiah. Why?

I think it was because the purpose of this return was to restore the temple and proper worship -- but it was not to restore the Davidic kingdom. That part of the restoration would come much later when Jesus would occupy the throne of David.

If the question in Acts 1:6 had been asked in Ezra's day, the answer would have been no. But when that question was asked in Acts 1, the answer was yes in the very next chapter.

And, getting back to Ezra 2, Zerubbabel, the godly grandson of the wicked King Jehoiachin, was a key part of God's plan to restore the kingdom to Israel.

Why? Because, although Zerubbabel was never a king, Zerubbabel had royal lineage back to David.

With that background, we would expect to find Zerubbabel in the genealogy of Christ. Do we? Yes. In fact, we find his name in both genealogies.

Luke traces the genealogy from King David through his son Nathan, while Matthew traces the genealogy through Solomon. But the two lines cross in Zerubbabel and his father, Shealtiel.

Matthew 1:12-13 - And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Shealtiel, and Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud.

Luke 3:27 - the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri.

To say that those two verses raise some questions is the understatement of the day!

What's the problem?

First, as we just read, Zerubbabel's son in Matthew is different from his son in Luke.

Second, Shealtiel's father in Matthew is different from his father in Luke.

Third, Matthew goes back through Solomon, while Luke going back through Nathan, so how do we have the same pair of names in both genealogies?

Fourth, if you count back from Jesus to Zerubbabel, you get 11 generations in Matthew and 20 generations in Luke.

So what is going on?

One possible explanation is that they are different father and son pairs. Yes, the names are the same between Matthew and Luke, but that is about where the similarity ends, so maybe that is what is happening here — two different father-son pairs in each genealogies having the same names.

I don't know about you, but that explanation is not entirely satisfactory. Zerubbabel is such an important figure, and his father in each list is the same. That really makes me want to think that we have only one Zerubbabel in these two genealogies, and it is the same Zerubbabel we find in Ezra.

But can I believe that with all of these differences? I think the answer is yes, but it does take some explanation.

As for the fourth problem — 11 generations back to Zerubbabel in Matthew versus 20 generations in Luke — we know there are some gaps in Matthew's genealogy. How do we know that for sure?

First, we know there are some gaps because we can identify them. Matthew 1:11 says that Josiah was the father of Jechoniah, but we know that he was in fact his grandfather. Matthew leaves out Jehoiakim. (The word "father" can mean simply an ancestor, as it does in Matthew 1:11.)

But second, we know there are some gaps for the simple reason that Matthew provides only nine names to cover the around five hundred years between Zerubbabel and Jesus, while Luke gives us eighteen names for the same time period.

But what about the other problems - different fathers and different sons?

How do we explain the different fathers of Shealtiel – Neri in Luke and Jechonias in Matthew?

The most likely explanation is that Shealtiel was the product of a levirate marriage. What is that?

The word “levirate” does not come from the name Levi, but rather from the Latin word “levir” meaning a husband’s brother.

A levirate marriage occurred when a man died childless. Rather than have that man’s line come to an end, his brother would father a child with his widow, and that child would then legally be the heir of the man who had died childless. (Deuteronomy 25:5-10)

In this case, Neri would have died childless, and his brother, Jechonias (who was King Jehoiachin) would have fathered a child with Neri’s widow. In that case, either Neri or Jechonias could be referred to as the father of Shealtiel — one being his actual father, and the other being his legal father.

But that does not entirely solve the problem for us. If Neri and Jehoiachin were brothers, then why don’t they have the same father? Matthew 1:11 tells us that Josiah was the father (actually, grandfather) of Jehoiachin, and Luke 3:28 tells us that Melchi was the father of Neri.

The answer is simple – if this theory is correct, then Neri and Jehoiachin must have been half-brothers with the same mother but different fathers.

That would also explain how Zerubbabel could appear in both genealogies of Christ even though one traces down through Nathan and the other traces down through Solomon.

Do we see a levirate marriage anywhere else in the Bible other than with Shealtiel? Yes – we see it with his son, Zerubbabel!

1 Chronicles 3:19 says that Zerubbabel’s father was Pedaiah, but Ezra 3:2 says that Zerubbabel’s father was Shealtiel (as do Matthew and Luke). Again, the most likely explanation was a levirate marriage.

Should it surprise us to see so many levirate marriages in the royal line? Not really, for two reasons.

First, in a royal line, you would expect siblings to have a higher death rate than normal, and, second, in a royal line, you would expect an increased concern with maintaining family lines. Putting those two things together suggests that one might expect to see more levirate marriages in a royal line than elsewhere.

Another possible explanation for having two fathers is adoption. This is likewise something that one might expect to see more of than usual in royal families. A king whose brother had died (perhaps with a little help from the king!) might be interested in keeping a close eye on his royal nephews. We will see an example of adoption in the book of Esther.

Esther 2:7 - "And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter."

Finally, what about the son of Zerubbabel? In Luke, his son is Rhesa, while in Matthew his son is Abiud. And 1 Chronicles 3:19-20 lists seven sons of Zerubbabel, none of which is either Rhesa or Abiud.

How do we explain that?

The short answer is that there are many potential explanations for the different names we find between Zerubbabel and Jesus in the two genealogies, and we can't look at all of them here.

We might ask why we have two genealogies in the first place? Some suggest that both genealogies give the genealogy through Joseph with Matthew providing the legal heirship of Jesus to the throne of David by naming the successive heirs of the kingdom from David to Jesus, while Luke gives Jesus' actual descent from David. Other say that Matthew gives Jesus' descent through Joseph, while Luke gives Jesus' descent through Mary.

I favor that second view, which would quickly explain why we have two different sons of Zerubbabel in the two genealogies. As for why the sons of Zerubbabel in Matthew and Luke don't match the names in 1 Chronicles,

either different names are used for the same people, or the list in 1 Chronicles was not exhaustive.

We need to pause and consider one more question about this issue before we move on. Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) was such an evil king that Jeremiah 22:30 said:

“Thus saith the LORD, Write ye this man childless, a man that shall not prosper in his days: for no man of his seed shall prosper, sitting upon the throne of David, and ruling any more in Judah.”

And yet right there in Matthew 1:12 we find King Jehoiachin listed among the ancestors of Jesus. How is that explained?

First, I think the phrase “in his days” in Jeremiah 22:30 is important – the focus of that verse was on the lifetime of Jehoiachin. He would not live to see any of his seed ruling from the throne of David – and we know that he did not.

Second, we should compare Jeremiah 22:30 with Jeremiah 36:30.

“Therefore thus saith the LORD of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost.”

That verse was written about Jehoiachin’s father even though we know that Jehoiachin did sit on David’s throne for about three months! Yes, he sat on the throne, but he was a powerless puppet king.

Again, the point of Jeremiah 36:30 is that Jehoiakim would not have a son who would “sit enthroned” where the Hebrew word used there denotes some degree of permanence and security. We see a similar pronouncement about Jehoiachin in Jeremiah 22:30.

Third, even if Jeremiah 22:30 was a curse on Jehoiachin and all his future descendants (as some suggest), that curse seems to have been lifted.

Jeremiah 22:24 says:

“As I live, saith the LORD, though Coniah the son of Jehoiakim king of Judah were the signet upon my right hand, yet would I pluck thee thence.”

And yet in Haggai 2:23 we read:

“In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.”

The ring came off, but the ring was put back on.

Back to Ezra 2

I said in an earlier lesson that Ezra does not refer to Nehemiah anywhere in his book, and yet right here in verse 2 we find Nehemiah. Should I correct what I said earlier? No.

Our timeline lets us know that the Nehemiah listed in verse 2 is not the Nehemiah who returned many years later in 445 BC, and the Mordecai listed here is not the Mordecai from the book of Esther.

Seraiah was also the name of Ezra’s father (7:1), and Bigvai is a Persian name that also occurs in the Elephantine Papyri as the governor of Judah following Nehemiah. But, again, our timeline lets us know that we just have different people with the same names.

LESSON 7

In Ezra 2:2, we have a list of 11 leaders: Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah.

In Nehemiah 7:7, we find a similar list:

They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah.

Aside from a few variations in spelling, the big difference between those two lists is that the one in Nehemiah has 12 names instead of only 11 names. Nahamani is added to the list in Jeremiah and is not present in the list from Ezra 2:2.

Why the difference? The simplest explanation is that, for whatever reason, Nehemiah just gives a longer list.

But in this case there may be another explanation. I very seldom opt for an explanation that involves an error in the process of copying, but we know that on very rare occasions that happened. We can see some minor differences in the various manuscripts that we have.

That may be what happened here. It is possible that the original version of Ezra 2:2 matched the version we have in Nehemiah 7:7 but somewhere along the way a name was inadvertently dropped from Ezra 2:2.

Why do I put that forward as a possibility? Because of the importance of the number 12. The list in Nehemiah has 12 leaders, while the list in Ezra has only 11 leaders. For a book with the major theme of continuity, the number 12 would have reinforced that theme. The number 12 would also have provided yet another link to the first exodus out of Egypt.

We can't say for sure, but I lean in the direction of thinking that the original list had 12 names just as in Nehemiah.

And now, let's look at the next list!

Ezra 2:2b-20

2b The number of the men of the people of Israel: 3 The children of Parosh, two thousand an hundred seventy and two. 4 The children of Shephatiah, three hundred seventy and two. 5 The children of Arah, seven hundred seventy and five. 6 The children of Pahathmoab, of the children of Jeshua and Joab, two thousand eight hundred and twelve. 7 The children of Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four. 8 The children of Zattu, nine hundred forty and five. 9 The children of Zaccai, seven hundred and threescore. 10 The children of Bani, six hundred forty and two. 11 The children of Bebai, six hundred twenty and three. 12 The children of Azgad, a thousand two hundred twenty and two. 13 The children of Adonikam, six hundred sixty and six. 14 The children of Bigvai, two thousand fifty and six. 15 The children of Adin, four hundred fifty and four. 16 The children of Ater of Hezekiah, ninety and eight. 17 The children of Bezai, three hundred twenty and three. 18 The children of Jorah, an hundred and twelve. 19 The children of Hashum, two hundred twenty and three. 20 The children of Gibbar, ninety and five.

Verses 3-20 are the names of the clans that returned. The end of verse 2 describes them as the men of the people of Israel.

The Bible usually reserves "Israel" for the entire nation of twelve tribes or for the Northern Kingdom that fell to Assyria. Why is "Israel" used here? The answer is our two main themes — continuity and restoration.

The word "Israel" is a reminder that this group was the heir to God's covenants to the nation as a whole. The restoration that was about to occur was going to go all the way back to the beginning – which is the only place to go if you want a true restoration. You need to strip away all of the layers of new paint until you get back to the original!

The names in this list are nearly identical to those in Nehemiah 7, but there is more variation in the numbers between the two lists. Why is that?

One commentator suggests this variation may be due to what he describes as "the notorious difficulty in copying Hebrew numbers." Vertical strokes were used for units, horizontal strokes were used for tens, and the initial letter in

the Hebrew word “meah” was used for hundreds. Single strokes could easily be overlooked or miscopied.

“While the proper names are in general agreement, the numerical notations frequently disagree. These discrepancies seemingly occur at random. Neither list consistently has the higher number. [The author of one article] provides a table listing twenty-nine differences between the lists of Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2 out of the 153 individual numerals or ciphers. Observing that the divergences usually occur in proper names and in numerical statistics, he believes the discrepancies between the lists to be the result of scribal error and shows how the Hebrew numerals could have been misinterpreted. ... Names and numbers were the great bane of copyists. Although scribes took great care to ensure the accuracy of their work, genealogies and numerical lists invariably proved to be the most difficult of all passages to accurately reproduce.”

The article referenced in that quote is a 1954 article from the *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, and I can provide a copy to anyone who wants to dig a little deeper on this issue.

Again, a copyist error is not my favorite explanation, but sometimes we need to consider it because we know it sometimes happened. Here we are faced with two lists having differences in the numerical counts, and errors in copying is the leading explanation.

Another possible explanation is that we have two lists separated by time with the list in Ezra being the counts that were made at the time of the first return, and the list in Nehemiah including updates that were made to that original list over time.

One older commentary found what it called “very curious coincidences with regard to numbers” in this list, and found them “coincidences hardly to be accounted for except on the supposition of some secret but perfect method of numerical reconciliation.” There is not much support for that view.

Several of these clan names occur elsewhere in the Bible. Eleven of the names are also found in Ezra 8 among those who later accompanied Ezra to Jerusalem. Fourteen are listed in Nehemiah 10 as signing the covenant of separation.

As for the names themselves, there is not a lot we can say. Some of them appear only here and in the parallel list from Nehemiah.

Parosh in verse 2 is the Hebrew word for “flea.” Some members of this clan later came with Ezra in Ezra 8:3. Others helped Nehemiah repair the wall in Nehemiah 3:25. But others of this clan were guilty of ignoring God’s law against intermarriage in Nehemiah 10:14 – which tells us that at least one “flea” did not “flee” when he should have!

The name Shephatiah in verse 4 is found several times in the Bible beginning with the fifth son of David. It was also the name of one of Jeremiah’s enemies in Jeremiah 38:1. It is possible that he was carried into captivity after Zedekiah’s rebellion and that some of his descendants were now returning. If so, they must have had the respect for Jeremiah that their ancestor lacked.

Arah in verse 5 is most likely the Arah mentioned in Nehemiah 6:18. If so, then one of Arah’s descendent had intermarried with Tobiah’s family, who was Nehemiah’s adversary. Tobiah was a Persian official, who along with Sanballat and Geshem, tried to stop the reconstruction of the walls. His marriage into Arah’s family tied him to an aristocratic Jewish family and caused some of the Jews to pledge their allegiance to him instead of to Nehemiah. We should note that this problem was caused by someone who violated God’s law about marriage – a problem that Ezra will address later in this book.

Since “Pahath-moab” in verse 6 literally means “governor of Moab.” It is possible that an ancestor had been a ruler over part of Moab prior to the exile. Although marriage to Moabites was forbidden among the returnees, it did occur as early as the times of the Judges, and we know that David’s ancestry was partially Moabite.

The name Zaccai in verse 9 has also been found in an archaeological discovery on a stamp seal.

The name Azgad in verse 12 means “mighty is Gad” and has been found in Aramaic documents from Egypt.

In verse 16, we find “the children of Ater of Hezekiah.” This is most likely not King Hezekiah because we would otherwise have expected Ater to have more prominence than he does.

As we said, the next list differs from the first list by describing the people, not based on their clan, but rather based on where they had lived prior to the exile. Presumably, those in this next group had either forgotten their clan, or perhaps some were from clans with so few people that they did not make the main list. (95 and 98 are the smallest counts in the previous list.)

Ezra 2:21-35

21 The children of Bethlehem, an hundred twenty and three. 22 The men of Netophah, fifty and six. 23 The men of Anathoth, an hundred twenty and eight. 24 The children of Azmaveth, forty and two. 25 The children of Kirjatharim, Chephirah, and Beeroth, seven hundred and forty and three. 26 The children of Ramah and Gaba, six hundred twenty and one. 27 The men of Michmas, an hundred twenty and two. 28 The men of Bethel and Ai, two hundred twenty and three. 29 The children of Nebo, fifty and two. 30 The children of Magbish, an hundred fifty and six. 31 The children of the other Elam, a thousand two hundred fifty and four. 32 The children of Harim, three hundred and twenty. 33 The children of Lod, Hadid, and Ono, seven hundred twenty and five. 34 The children of Jericho, three hundred forty and five. 35 The children of Senaah, three thousand and six hundred and thirty.

Although the list of place names we just read starts at verse 21, it is possible that the list actually starts with verse 20: “The children of Gibbar, ninety and five.” The parallel passage in Nehemiah 7:25 has Gibeon rather than Gibbar, and Gibeon is about five miles northwest of Jerusalem.

Some of the descriptions begin with “the **sons** of” or “**children** of” while others begin with “the **men** of.” The NIV obliterates this distinction, and, while it is true that the phrases appear to be synonymous here, it should make you wonder what else the NIV is obliterating. (If there is ambiguity in the original text, a good translation carries that ambiguity over into the English version – a poor translation does not.)

By listing people both by clan and by geographical location, God is confirming their connection to those who occupied the land prior to the exile. This was not just some new group with which God decided to start over, but rather this group was very closely connected to those who had been taken captive. These people were **returning** (Ezra 2:1 “came again”) – and that word makes no sense unless they are connected to those who were taken away.

Again, we can say a few things about some of these places.

Bethlehem in verse 21 is the place of Jesus’ birth and is located about five miles south of Jerusalem.

Anathoth in verse 23 was a priestly settlement in Benjamite territory and was Jeremiah’s hometown (Jeremiah 1:1). It is about three miles northeast of Jerusalem.

Ramah in verse 26 was Samuel’s home, about four miles north of Jerusalem.

Geba in verse 26 was located five and a half miles northeast of Jerusalem and was used to denote the northern limit of the Jewish people Zechariah 14:10, a great prophecy about the church.

Micmash in verse 27 is located just to the north across a deep valley from Geba. Before a decisive battle in 1 Samuel 13, Saul encamped at Geba and the Philistines at Micmash.

The “other Elam” in verse 31 refers back to the Elam we saw in verse 7.

Lod in verse 33 is seven miles southeast of Joppa, and is located today near Israel’s international airport.

Jericho in verse 34 is about 18 miles east of Jerusalem.

So far we have seen the list of clans and the list of towns. Next we will see a list of the priests.

Ezra 2:36-39

36 The priests: the children of Jedaiah, of the house of Jeshua, nine hundred seventy and three. 37 The children of Immer, a thousand fifty and two. 38 The children of Pashur, a thousand two hundred forty and seven. 39 The children of Harim, a thousand and seventeen.

Starting in verse 36, Ezra begins to list the priests and the temple ministers who returned.

From the numbers given here, it seems that about 10% of the returnees were priests.

While that number may seem high, we should remember that priests had the most to gain from a return to Jerusalem. They would have a steady source of income combined with a high social status. Also, they were very much needed by a group whose mission was to rebuild the temple and restore proper worship.

David had organized the priests into 24 family groups in 1 Chronicles 24, but only four of those 24 groups are represented here. These same four groups are also the only ones listed later when Ezra returned (Ezra 10:18-22).

According to Jewish tradition, the original 24 courses of priests were reconstituted from these 4 families, with each of the reconstituted families taking the name of the one of the original families. If so, that would explain how Zechariah in Luke 1:5 was of the course of Abia or Abijah.

Notice that the house of Jeshua is mentioned in verse 36. Some point to this verse as evidence that the author was getting these figures from a much later list (at which point Jeshua, they say, had 973 descendants). But all the verse says is that the **house** of Jeshua had 973 people; that is, it is the clan or family size rather than the number of descendants. Also, we could be seeing another Jeshua here; it was a very common name, and in fact we do see another Jeshua in verse 40.

Jedaiah was the second order in 1 Chronicles 24:7. Immer was the 16th order in 1 Chronicles 24:14. Harim was the 1 Chronicles third order in 24:8.

Pashur is not listed in 1 Chronicles 24. But 1 Chronicles 9:12 tells us that Pashur was the son of Malchijah, and Malchijah was the fifth order in 1 Chronicles 24:9.

Later in Ezra 10:22, six of Pashur's sons will be encouraged by Ezra to divorce their foreign wives.

Ezra 2:40-42

40 The Levites: the children of Jeshua and Kadmiel, of the children of Hodaviah, seventy and four. 41 The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight. 42 The children of the porters: the children of Shallum, the children of Ater, the children of Talmon, the children of Akkub, the children of Hatita, the children of Shobai, in all an hundred thirty and nine.

Verses 40-42 list the Levites, the singers, and the gatekeepers.

Jeshua the Levite in verse 40 is not the same Jeshua from verse 2 who was the High Priest – again, it was a common name.

The Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. Because they had no land inheritance, they lived in 48 Levitical cities and were supported by tithes. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

The first thing we notice about the Levites listed here is that their number was small compared to the number of priests. Later, Ezra would have only 38 Levites travel back with him (Ezra 8:15-20).

Why so few? It may be because the Levites had no inheritance to which to return. (But Ezra 7:24 tells us they were exempt from taxes.)

Other possibilities are that fewer Levites were deported initially because they were from the poorer class, or perhaps many Levites had moved over to secular work during the exile and liked their new social status in Babylon better than their old social status in Jerusalem.

Ezra will describe his problem in finding enough Levites in Ezra 8:15-30, which tells us that the problem did not go away any time soon.

In our introduction, we talked about the false notion of some that Ezra wrote or rewrote the Law of Moses so that the version we have today in our Bibles did not exist prior to the time of Ezra. The extremely small number of Levites is very strong evidence **against** that common modernist view. Why?

In the law (Numbers 18:21, 26), it is assumed that the Levites would greatly outnumber the priests. For example, the Levites received the tithes and passed only a tenth (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests. What that means is that at that time the priests were likely about 10% of the tribe of Levi.

Plus, under the Mosaic Law, the Levites lived in 48 Levitical cities — whereas here we hardly have 48 Levites in total!

Had the law been rewritten during the time of Ezra as some argue, it would never have reached us in the form that we now have it.

“Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah was still being added to and revised.”

After the Levites in verse 40, we have the singers in verse 41.

According to 1 Chronicles 15:16-24, David had organized the singers into 24 groups to correspond to the 24 groups of priests, but only one group (“the children of Asaph”) is mentioned here.

The name Asaph in verse 41 is associated with a number of the Psalms, including, for example, Psalm 50, which has the heading “A Psalm of Asaph.”

Why so few singers? Again, most likely the demand for singers was small in Babylon and so they gradually moved to secular occupations, while also failing to teach their children how to sing.

After the singers in verse 41, we find the porters or the gatekeepers in verse 42.

The gatekeepers were responsible for locking and unlocking the gates of the temple and to keep watch over the treasury, according to 1 Chronicles 9:17–29. Another descendant of Shallum is mentioned as a gatekeeper in the time of Jeremiah (35:4).

What we are seeing here is that the people who returned were the same people who had been exiled – but they were also different. They had been changed by the exile, and some things had been lost.

For example, it seems that many of those with skills dedicated to the temple had neglected those skills and moved to secular jobs while in exile. Much about the law had been forgotten as well, as we will see later in this book. The difficult task of restoration lay ahead, and the further the drift, the more difficult the task.

There is a big lesson for us hidden in these simple lists. Instead of 24 divisions of priests, there were only four. Instead of 24 divisions of singers, there were only one. Instead of 48 Levitical cities, there were hardly 48 Levites in total!

What had happened? Babylon had happened. God's people had been changed by Babylon. In some ways, they had been changed for the better by learning the lessons that God had intended them to learn in the exile. But in other ways they had been changed for the worse; they had forgotten much and neglected much. Most likely there were Jews who had no desire to move to Jerusalem and no interest in what was going on there.

And what is the lesson for us? Simple. Babylon hasn't gone anywhere. The church today is also exiled in Babylon. We are not located in our promised land of rest, but rather we are living in pagan Babylon.

Will we change Babylon or will Babylon change us?

Will we let the distractions of this world cause us to forget God's word and neglect our Christian duties? Will we transfer our loyalties to the world?

The call of the book of Ezra is a call for God's people to return to God's word – and that is a call for all of us.

LESSON 8

The next list we see is the list of temple servants.

Ezra 2:43-54

43 The Nethinims: the children of Ziha, the children of Hasupha, the children of Tabbaoth, 44 The children of Keros, the children of Siaha, the children of Padon, 45 The children of Lebanah, the children of Hagabah, the children of Akkub, 46 The children of Hagab, the children of Shalmal, the children of Hanan, 47 The children of Giddel, the children of Gahar, the children of Reaiah, 48 The children of Rezin, the children of Nekoda, the children of Gazzam, 49 The children of Uzza, the children of Paseah, the children of Besai, 50 The children of Asnah, the children of Mehunim, the children of Nephusim, 51 The children of Bakbuk, the children of Hakupha, the children of Harhur, 52 The children of Bazluth, the children of Mehida, the children of Harsha, 53 The children of Barkos, the children of Sisera, the children of Thamah, 54 The children of Nezhiah, the children of Hatipha.

Verses 43-54 list the temple servants, which comes from the Hebrew word translated “Nethinim” in verse 43. That Hebrew word literally means “the given” or “the dedicated ones.” Ezra 8:20 tells us that they attended the Levites, which most likely means they assisted the Levites in performing their more mundane duties.

The many foreign names in this list indicates that this group likely consisted of people of non-Israelite descent.

Ezekiel 44:6-9 tells us that Israel was not always careful about using foreigners as temple servants and may have even allowed them to serve as priests. Exodus 12:48 and Numbers 15:14-16 tell us that foreigners were welcome to sojourn with the Jews, but they had to follow the law. (“One law and one rule shall be for you and for the stranger who sojourns with you.”)

Some of these temple servants may have been descendants of the Gibeonites, whom Joshua had made woodcutters and water carriers in Joshua 9:27. Likewise, First Chronicles 22:2 tells us that David brought in strangers to work

on the temple. This group may also have included people who were acquired through war as described in Numbers 31:25-47.

It is interesting to note that these temple servants for foreign descent returned from the exile even when many of the Jews, for whatever reason, stayed behind in Babylon.

Ezra 2:55-58

55 The children of Solomon’s servants: the children of Sotai, the children of Sophereth, the children of Peruda, 56 The children of Jaalah, the children of Darkon, the children of Giddel, 57 The children of Shephatiah, the children of Hattil, the children of Pochereth of Zebaim, the children of Ami. 58 All the Nethinims, and the children of Solomon’s servants, were three hundred ninety and two.

Verses 55-57 list the descendants of Solomon’s servants. This group is a puzzling category, and it is not clear what they were supposed to do.

This group must have been closely related to the temple servants because they are both included in the single total given in verse 58.

These servants of Solomon may have come from the native population that Solomon used for work on the temple in 1 Kings 5:13-18.

The name “Sophereth” in verse 55 means “the scribe,” and the name “Pochereth of Zebaim” in verse 57 (translated “Pochereth-hazzebaim” in the ESV) means “the gazelle keeper.”

These may have been the names of guilds. If so, at least some of these servants may have been more involved with secular tasks than the temple servants. (But Ezra 7:24 seems to refer to this group as “other servants of this house of God,” so we can’t be certain about what they did.)

Ezra 2:59-63

59 And these were they which went up from Telmelah, Telharsa, Cherub, Addan, and Immer: but they could not shew their father’s house, and their seed, whether they were of Israel: 60 The children of Delaiah, the children

of Tobiah, the children of Nekoda, six hundred fifty and two. 61 And of the children of the priests: the children of Habaiah, the children of Koz, the children of Barzillai; which took a wife of the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called after their name: 62 These sought their register among those that were reckoned by genealogy, but they were not found: therefore were they, as polluted, put from the priesthood. 63 And the Tirshatha said unto them, that they should not eat of the most holy things, till there stood up a priest with Urim and with Thummim.

Verses 59-63 describe those who had lost their family records. The context here suggests that the towns in verse 59 are most likely the Babylonian towns from which these exiles had come.

Apparently some had lost their family records during the exile, or possibly some of these people were proselytes. Nehemiah 7:5 speaks of “the book of the genealogy,” and for whatever reason these people were not in it. They were not sent back, but were likely given the status of circumcised foreigners, at least temporarily.

The “priests” among this group were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. Numbers 16:40 warned that “no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, should draw near to burn incense before the Lord,” and so these men were excluded.

Keep in mind that after AD 70, when all of the genealogical records were destroyed, all of the Jews were suddenly in the same situation as that of the Jews in these verses.

Barzillai in verse 61 is interesting, and is in fact unique in Scripture in having taken the name of his father-in-law. The elder Barzillai appears to be the same person in 2 Samuel 17:27 and 19:32 who helped David when he fled from Absalom. It is interesting that the priest who married his daughter took his name, and some surmise it was so he could inherit land in violation of Numbers 18:20, which could explain the trouble his descendants were experiencing here.

What are the Urim and Thummin in verse 63?

The exact nature of the Urim and Thummim has been called “one of the great mysteries of the OT.” What is known is that they were placed in the breastpiece of the high priest.

Exodus 28:30 — And in the breastpiece of judgment you shall put the Urim and the Thummim, and they shall be on Aaron’s heart, when he goes in before the Lord.

Leviticus 8:8 — And he put the breastplate upon him: also he put in the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim.

It has been suggested that they were two small objects that were used to signify the will of God, much like the casting of lots.

Josephus contends that the answer was given by a miraculous shining of the jewels on the high priest’s garments. It is likely that 1 Samuel 23:9–12 and 30:7–8 may refer to them with the use of the word "ephod."

The words Urim and Thummin are spelled with the first letter and the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Septuagint translates them as “lights and perfections.” We see them elsewhere in Scripture:

1 Samuel 14:41 — Therefore Saul said, “O Lord God of Israel, why have you not answered your servant this day? If this guilt is in me or in Jonathan my son, O Lord, God of Israel, give Urim. But if this guilt is in your people Israel, give Thummim.”

Numbers 27:21 — And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

Apparently, as we said, they were small objects carried by the High Priest in his garments and used to answers questions that required a yes or no response. Such also occurred in the New Testament in Acts 1:26 when Matthias was chosen over Justus by the casting of lots.

These questionable priests were to be excluded from the priesthood until a High Priest would come who could use the Urim and Thummin to determine their true status. Since Jeshua is not mentioned here, it is possible that no high priest had yet been appointed.

We don't know for sure if these questionable priests were ever allowed to serve as priests in the temple because here and the parallel passage in Nehemiah 7 are the last time the Urim and Thummin are mentioned in Scripture.

Some commentaries suggest that Hakkoz in verse 61 (Koz in the KJV) was later allowed to be a priest because Meremoth, the son of Uriah, is identified as a priest in Ezra 8:33 and as the grandson of Hakkoz in Nehemiah 3:4, but that could just be a case of common names.

The Tirshatha in verse 63 is the Persian word for governor and likely refers to Sheshbazzar as it does in Ezra 5:14, where the Hebrew word for governor is used, or it could refer to Zerubbabel. That the governor was making these decisions again suggests that perhaps no high priest had yet been appointed.

How important was it that only those Levites who were descendants of Aaron be priests? We could ask Korah from Numbers 16, but of course he did not live long enough to see the end of that chapter. Korah remains today as an example of those who rebel against God's demands for proper worship (Jude 11). Men ignore God's commands for proper worship at their peril. That has also been true, from the beginning pages of the Bible up until the present day.

Ezra 2:64-70

64 The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore, 65 Beside their servants and their maids, of whom there were seven thousand three hundred thirty and seven: and there were among them two hundred singing men and singing women. 66 Their horses were seven hundred thirty and six; their mules, two hundred forty and five; 67 Their camels, four hundred thirty and five; their asses, six thousand seven hundred and twenty. 68 And some of the chief of the fathers, when they came to the house of the LORD which is at Jerusalem, offered freely for the house of God to set it up in his place: 69 They gave after their ability unto the treasure of the work threescore and one thousand drams of gold, and five thousand pound of silver, and one hundred priests' garments. 70 So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

The numbers in the list add up to 29,818, which is 12,542 fewer than the total of 42,360 given in verse 64.

Nehemiah 7 provides that same total, although the sum in his list is 31,089 (which is 11,271 fewer than the total).

Why the differences?

As we discussed, the differences in the individual numbers between Ezra and Nehemiah might be explainable as rounding or copyist errors, or possibly the use of a later, updated list.

But what about the larger total? How do we explain that?

Some suggest the larger total included the women and the children under 12. That would be a surprisingly small number of women and children – but perhaps the difficulties in this first journey caused many women and children to remain behind.

Others suggest that the larger total includes families from tribes other than Judah and Benjamin.

Most likely, some families were simply omitted from the itemized list, but were included in the total (which we also saw as a possibility with the temple items).

Although 42,000 seems like a lot of people to be traveling together in the exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem, it seems small when we compare it to the number who participated in the initial exodus out of Egypt.

Exodus 12:37 — And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children.

And although we don't have a count of those who remained behind, we do have Esther 9:16, which tells us that those who remained behind were able to kill 75,000 of their enemies (and we will look at that verse in detail when we get to it).

In any event, the number that returned was most likely much smaller than the number who remained behind in Babylon.

Should that have caused the people to be discouraged? No, not those who were faithful and who knew the word of God. God very often uses what the world considers small and insignificant to topple that which the world considers big and significant.

In fact, the book of Zechariah made this same point — twice.

Zechariah 4:6 — Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.

Zechariah 4:10 — For who hath despised the day of small things?

That verse reminds me of something Jesus said:

Matthew 13:31-32 — The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.

We might ask who hath despised the mustard seed? Or, as Paul asked, "Despise ye the church of God?" (1 Corinthians 11:22).

We should never despise the small things because that is how God works in this world today, and that is how God has often worked in this world. God takes the small things of this world and turns them into great and wonderful things! God has always worked through a small faithful remnant - both then and today.

1 Corinthians 1:28 — And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are.

God's eternal plan to bless the entire world came to fruition in the form of a small baby asleep in a manger. "For who hath despised the day of small things?" Let's make sure that question can never be directed to us!

Why are we told in verses 65-66 about how many servants and horses and donkeys they had?

That information is important because it tells us about the economic condition of the people, and what it tells us is that there were some wealthy people among the returned exiles.

The very large number of servants (about one to every six freeman) combined with the gold and silver in verse 69 points to great wealth by some, but not by all. The rich had horses while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

When Haggai prophesied about 20 years later, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left the Jews with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity — and to remind them of their neglect of God’s house. (Haggai 1:4)

The singers in verse 65 are not the same as the temple singers we saw earlier. These singers in verse 65 were professional singers who could be hired to sing at marriage feasts and funerals.

Verse 68 provides a hint of what was to come when it says that “**some** of the heads of families ... made freewill offerings.”

Some gave, but others it appears did not. Haggai 1:7-11 links the worsened economic condition to the people’s neglect of the temple — it was “because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house.” (Haggai 1:9)

Although many of the Jews settled in Jerusalem, verse 70 tells us that some settled in other cities, either cities that they had formerly occupied or elsewhere.

Chapter 2 at first glance seems long and tedious, but it is anything but tedious when we see it for what it is.

First, it is a roll call of all who were willing to leave comfort and security behind when God opened a great door for them.

Second, this entire chapter is a prelude to the great events of rebuilding the temple and restoring proper worship that were to come. That restoration would not be possible absent the genealogical information in this chapter that had been carefully preserved during the exile.

It was a great joy for these people to be involved in the plan of God, as we see in Psalm 126 (which many think refers to this period of time):

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negeb! Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

Ezra 3:1

And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem.

After the issues involved with resettling on the land were completed, it was time to focus on the primary reason for the return – religious restoration.

Although the year is not indicated in verse 1, the reference to the "seventh month" most naturally points us back to the first year of the return that we saw in Chapter 1. If so, that would mean that the events in these opening verses of Chapter 3 took place in 538, the same time when Cyrus issued his decree and the Jews first returned under Sheshbazzar.

The seventh month was Tishri (September-October). It was also in the seventh month that Solomon gathered the people together to dedicate the **first** temple in 1 Kings 8:2.

The seventh month was the most important month in the Jewish calendar. On the first day of the seventh month they would have celebrated the New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. On the tenth day was the Day of Atonement. From the fifteenth until the twenty-first day they would have celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles.

Verse 1 tells us that the people gathered “as one man.” They had a common bond and a common purpose, and they understood that a united worship was vital in dealing with dangers from outside. I’m sure I don’t need to point out the lessons for us in that description.

Matthew 12:25 — Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.

Acts 2:44 tells us that on the day the church was established, “all that believed were together, and had all things in common.” The church operates as "one body" just as those here in verse 1 operate as "one man."

God’s people must be a united people if we are ever going to accomplish the things that God has commanded us to accomplish. That was true in the days of Ezra, and it is true today.

1 Corinthians 1:10 — Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

That is the will of God for the people of God.

LESSON 9

Ezra 3:2

2 Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God.

Two major leaders stand out in the first half of Ezra, and we see them both (again) in verse 2: Jeshua and Zerubbabel.

Jeshua was (or soon became) the High Priest, and he was the grandson of the High Priest prior to the exile. Zerubbabel was the grandson of King Jehoiachin, the king of Judah prior to the exile. Their presence provides very strong evidence of the continuity between these people and those Jews who had been carried away to Babylon 70 years earlier.

Again we should note that while Zerubbabel was from the line of King David, Zerubbabel was very definitely not a king, and I'm sure he would have been the first to tell you that. Had Zerubbabel called himself a king at this time, his reign would have lasted only until King Cyrus heard about it, no doubt from the neighbors of the Jews. Cyrus had not allowed the Jews to return so that they could set up a kingdom. Their king at this time was the King of Persia. Israel had no king at this time, and, in fact, the throne of David would remain unoccupied until Jesus came to sit on that throne for eternity (as had been promised to David).

But even though he was not a king, Zerubbabel was a vital link to the House of David that was required for God to later raise up a descendant of King David to sit on the throne of David. And, as Zechariah tells us, Jeshua the High Priest and Zerubbabel the descendant of royalty together prefigured the perfect King and High Priest who was to come, a combination that Hebrews tells us could never occur under the Old Law.

Again, we wonder what happened to Sheshbazzar, the leader of the people on their return in Chapter 1. As we discussed earlier, some surmise that Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel are two names for the same person, which is very unlikely. Others suggest that Zerubbabel may have been a subordinate leader under Sheshbazzar. Meyers suggests that Sheshbazzar may have been an elderly figurehead, with Zerubbabel being in charge of the day-to-day affairs. In Ezra 5:16, we will be told that “Sheshbazzar came and laid the foundations of the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

Many times the hardest part of a project is just getting it started. Someone needs to step up and take the initiative, and that is why having good leadership is so important, especially at the start of a big project. Otherwise, great plans are likely to remain just that — great plans!

Two more points about Zerubbabel and Jeshua:

(1) Zerubbabel and Jeshua are mentioned together in 7 verses of the Bible. Verse 2 is the only one of these 7 verses in which Jeshua’s name appears before Zerubbabel’s name. Why is that? Most likely the reason is because this section is focused on worship.

(2) 1 Chronicles 3:19 tells us that Shelomith was the daughter of Zerubbabel. Archeologists have found a seal in which a woman named Shelomith is identified as the wife of Elnathan, the governor who is thought to have succeeded Zerubbabel.

Back to verse 2, what is the first thing the people did?

The first thing the people did was build an altar. Building the altar before construction of the temple was also in line with the example of David, who had constructed an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah after the king had purchased the hilltop in 2 Samuel 24:25 that became the Temple Mount, which 3000 years later is today the most hotly contested piece of land in the world.

Ezra 4:2 will suggest that there was already an altar here, but if so the Jews would have considered that altar to be defiled and unusable and would have taken it down to put up their own.

That action may explain some of the hostility that we are about to see. That previous altar would have been constructed by the Jews, Samaritans, and foreigners who lived near Jerusalem during the exile, and its destruction would have infuriated them. We will read about that hostility in Chapter 4.

But hostile or not, the people were right to take down the defiled altar and build a new one “as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God” (verse 2). A central theme of this book is that man must worship God as God desires (rather than as man desires), and we see that happening here in verse 2.

And if there is an incorrect and defiled altar, the solution is not to just try to clean it up and fix it. The solution is to get rid of it and start over. That is the difference between reformation and restoration. What we see here is restoration.

Just think for a moment about what it would be like if we were suddenly carried off into exile to a place where we did not speak the language, and then, 70 years later, our grandchildren (most of whom would have been born in that foreign land) returned to this city. Would any faithful people remain to rebuild this building and restore proper worship here? How would we ensure that would happen? This book is going to show us. In fact, verse 2 right here shows us: “as it is written.”

The Bible is the only authoritative rule for religious practice, and that message rings out very loudly in the book of Ezra.

What would have been offered on that altar? The daily offerings included a yearling male lamb offered each morning, with the appropriate accompanying cereal and drink offerings. (Leviticus 6:8–13; Exodus 29:38–42; Numbers 28:3–8). A similar offering was made in the evening.

How was the altar constructed? The answer to that question points us to a theme of the book that we have already seen and will continue to see — the events in this book are pointing us to the permanent eternal kingdom that was later established in Jerusalem in Acts 2.

How does this altar do that?

Exodus 20:25 – And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.

The stones of this altar were not to be shaped by human hands.

That immediately reminds us of the great stone of Daniel 2

Daniel 2:44-45 – And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands...

There is a connection that runs throughout the Bible between worship and human hands. In short, the two don't go together.

Micah 5:13 — Thy graven images also will I cut off, and thy standing images out of the midst of thee; and thou shalt no more worship the work of thine hands.

Acts 17:24-25 — God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things.

Those who think they can worship God today using an instrument made with human hands and played with human hands (as opposed to using the instrument God made – the human voice) need to very carefully consider these verses.

What we see in this altar is what we see throughout the Bible when it comes to worship – worship must be done as God commands, and God is not worshipped with men's hands. (Acts 17:25)

Verse 2 mentions “Moses the man of God.” Moses is mentioned 10 times in Ezra and Nehemiah. Why?

This reference back to Moses stresses both of the major themes of the book – continuity and restoration. Continuity because these people are Moses’ people, and restoration because these people are returning to the Law that Moses received from God.

We are also about to see physical continuity as the people work to restore the physical structures of the altar and the temple as described in the Law of Moses.

Ezra 3:3-6

3 And they set the altar upon his bases; for fear was upon them because of the people of those countries: and they offered burnt offerings thereon unto the LORD, even burnt offerings morning and evening. 4 They kept also the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt offerings by number, according to the custom, as the duty of every day required; 5 And afterward offered the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons, and of all the set feasts of the LORD that were consecrated, and of every one that willingly offered a freewill offering unto the LORD. 6 From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt offerings unto the LORD. But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.

Verse 3 tells us that “fear was upon them because of the people of those countries.” Yes, they were afraid, and they had reason to be. They were in a strange place surrounded by hostile people. Courage is not the lack of fear; courage is the will to act in spite of fear. And these people were courageous with a courage that came from their reliance on God.

At this point, the people had what one commentary called a “healthy fear.” Why was it a healthy fear?

It was a healthy fear because it was based on a realistic recognition of the great challenges that faced them. It was a healthy fear because it drove them to be obedient to the will of God regardless of the circumstances. It was a healthy fear because it drove them to trust in God for help and protection.

But eventually, as we will see, this “healthy fear” became a paralyzing fear, and that sort of fear caused this rebuilding to come to an end.

No matter who or what surrounds us, God’s people should never be a timid people. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:13 – “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.” And recall 2 Timothy 1:7 – “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

The “peoples of the lands” in verse 3 likely included the surrounding peoples (Ashdod, Samaria, Ammon, Moab, and Edom), those of foreign descent now living in Judah, and Jews who had remained behind and who had not maintained their faith but rather had compromised with the world. This group also included some who had earlier been forcibly settled in this area by the Assyrians. (That group will be mentioned in Ezra 4:2.)

One might have expected the Jews who remained in the land to be faithful and rebuild what had been destroyed, but that is not what happened. The faithful Jews we see in Ezra are the Jewish exiles who returned, not the Jews who remained behind.

Each of these groups would have been hostile to what was now taking place. In fact, the book of Ezra has much to say about how the people of God should live in an angry, hostile environment. And I think we would all agree that our own environment has very quickly become much more angry and much more hostile to the ways of God and the people of God.

Who would have ever thought that publishing Matthew 19:4 (“Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female?”) would lead to death threats? And yet that is the world in which we are now living. The Jews of Ezra’s day are not the only people of God who ever had angry and hostile neighbors!

As we see so often in the Old Testament, building an altar was a significant act that often marked a renewed dedication to following God. Verse 3 tells us that

they set the altar in its place – which means they put it in the same position it occupied prior to the exile.

We also see that the daily sacrifices were restored. And how did they know what to do? They did “as it is written,” and they did “according to the custom” in verse 4 (or “according to the rule” in the ESV). Turning back to God’s word is the only possible path to restoration of proper worship and service to God. To restore anything to its original state we need the original blueprint, and the Bible is the original blueprint when it comes to pleasing God.

Notice how careful they were to follow every detail. They set the altar **in its place**. They performed the sacrifices **by number according to the rule**.

There is a lesson here for us. Details are important, and we neglect those details at our peril.

If we don’t care about the “little” things, then that apathy about the so-called little things will very soon become apathy about the “big” things. What that means is that when it comes to making sure our worship is pleasing to God, there are no little things. God cares about the details, and so also must we.

Twenty years later, Zechariah would ask a question about this very point.

Zechariah 4:10 – For who hath despised the day of small things?

The “small things” in that verse referred to what the people were now doing. Some of them apparently thought that this rebuilding was just not worth doing at all because the rebuilt temple would never be as grand as the first temple.

But God was seeking obedience and faithfulness in his people, and whether they were constructing a giant temple or “small things” did not matter if they were following God’s commands.

Mankind's problem is that we are not a good judge of what is a “small thing,” and sadly for many or most in the religious world today, they have classified as “small things” that which God has classified as big things! Obedience is always a big thing!

Now that the remnant had a restored altar, they were once again able to follow the commanded calendar of events.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths in the fall was one of the three most important Jewish celebrations, with the other two being Passover in the spring and Pentecost in the summer.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, the people lived for seven days in booths or tents to remind them of God's protection of their ancestors in the wilderness. It will be at this same feast that Ezra will read the law to the people much later in Nehemiah 8:14-18.

The Feast of the Tabernacles must have been particularly meaningful to the returned exiles. Those who had participated in the second exodus were having a feast to remember the first exodus. They had just experienced God's protection themselves as they traveled back from Babylon. And perhaps some of them were literally living in booths or tents in their ruined city.

The purpose of this feast was to remind the people of the fragility of this life and of their dependence on God for all things. That is a reminder that we all need. Modern man thinks he is secure apart from God – but there is no security apart from God. God offers the only security that is real and lasting security, and that is why the people celebrated this feast.

Verse 5 mentions “the continual burnt offering, both of the new moons.” What is that? At first, it seems odd to see this mention of a heavenly body because of the frequent prohibitions against the worship of such.

But, of course, the people here were not worshiping the moon – they were instead using the moon to determine the time of certain events – which is one of the reasons why God gave us the moon.

Genesis 1:14 — And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years.

And there are many other reasons God created the moon. If you ever want to show someone the design evident in the universe, you don't need to start with the stars. You can start much closer by looking at the moon. There are many properties of the moon, such as its existence, its orbit, its size, its location, and its mass, that are vital to life on earth. Even today, secular science struggles to explain how the moon came to be. But we know how that happened, and we know why that happened.

The Jews followed a lunar calendar in which each month consisted of a full revolution of the moon. So a new moon marked the beginning of a new month. The burnt offerings of the new moon in verse 5 were the burnt offerings commanded in Numbers 28:11 – “And in the beginnings of your months ye shall offer a burnt offering unto the LORD.”

One of the most important events in the Jewish calendar is not mentioned here – the Day of Atonement. Why?

Possibly because it was a very solemn day, and so it did not fit in with the joyous theme of this chapter. But another possible reason is that it could not be observed because the ark of the covenant was no longer in existence. As described in Leviticus 16, the blood of the sacrificed goat was to be sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark on the Day of Atonement, and that was no longer possible absent the ark.

What was the purpose of the Jewish sacrifices? They were offered for the sins of the people (Hebrews 7:27). They were a remembrance of sins (Hebrews 10:3), but they could never take away sins (Hebrews 10:4, 11). Only the perfect sacrifice was able to take away sin.

Hebrews 10:11-14 — And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

And yet forgiveness was promised under the Old Law.

Leviticus 4:35 — And the priest shall make an atonement for his sin that he hath committed, and it shall be forgiven him.

How can there be forgiveness if the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin? The answer is that for the faithful Jews of the Old Testament, that forgiveness came later from the blood of Christ – the perfect sacrifice. We sometimes describe this as a “rolling forward” of their sin.

Hebrews 10:3-4 – But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

That is why, I believe, the faithful Jews who had died were in a holding area prior to the cross as we see in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus where it is referred to as Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). That all changed at the cross.

Hebrews 10:10 – By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And those faithful Jews who had died under the Old Covenant could then be with Christ, having been cleansed of those sins that had been rolled forward to the cross. In my opinion, that event is described in Ephesians when Christ ascended, leading captivity captive.

Ephesians 4:8 - Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

So that, after the cross, Paul did not expect to depart and be with Abraham, but rather he expected to depart and be with Christ.

Philippians 1:23 - For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.

But for those under the Old Covenant during the exile, what happened when the temple was destroyed and the sacrifices ceased?

What happened was that there was no longer a rolling forward of that sin. Instead, that sin, so to speak, just piled up year after year. There must have been incredible joy among the people when these sacrifices were restored.

This was the not the first time the sacrifices had been restored. They had started about 1000 years earlier, and they had been restored at least twice before – under Joash in 2 Chronicles 24:14 and under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29:7, 27-29.

Each time the procedure for restoration was simple – Step (A): Read God’s word. Step (B): Do what you read in God’s word. And there is no Step (C).

Sometimes the people had an earlier step – locate God’s word – but that is no problem for us. We are surrounded by Bibles. Some people say that truth is scarce, and perhaps it is, but, at least in our day and in our country, the supply of truth has always exceeded the demand!

LESSON 10

The restoration of God's temple had a special meaning for these exiles for another reason. For 70 years they had been surrounded on all sides by pagan temples to false gods.

About 50 temples are mentioned in Babylonian texts, along with over 1500 shrines for their false gods. Every time the Jews saw one of those false temples or shrines, they must have remembered the true temple that had been destroyed.

Freewill gifts are offered in verse 5. They are described in Leviticus 22:18-23, and they were the only sacrifices that non-Jews were allowed to offer to God.

The heart that loves God desires to worship God in a way that pleases him, and these people had that heart. We see that heart in these freewill offerings. These people were not just doing what was required – they were going beyond what was required. They made the offerings that God had commanded, and then they made additional offerings.

Verse 6 ends with a “but” – “But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid.”

One point of this statement is that even though the sacrificial system had been reinstated, there was much work that remained to be done.

A partial restoration is not a restoration at all; it is instead, at best, more of a reformation. And while a reformation may accomplish some needed reforms, those reforms are not enough unless they proceed toward a complete restoration of proper worship. Ezra is not describing a reformation movement; Ezra is describing a restoration movement. There is a huge difference between the two.

But there is another lesson in verse 6, and once again we have a lesson pointing us forward to the church. I think the final phrase in verse 6 (“But the

foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid”) has both a negative lesson and a positive lesson. We just saw the negative lesson – there was much work left to be done. What is the positive lesson?

What verse 6 is telling us is that the worship of God on the Temple Mount had been reinstated, even though no temple existed. In fact, not even the foundations for the second temple had yet been laid.

Jeremiah had told the Jews before the exile that they should trust in God rather than in the physical temple.

Jeremiah 7:4 — Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.

Jeremiah 7:14-15 — Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim.

Although their forefathers had placed their trust in the temple rather than in the Lord of that temple, these people, their descendants, had learned in their land of exile that God’s presence and God’s worship did not require a building.

That realization must have been shocking for the Jews, but it is not shocking for those of us in the church. God dwells in his people, not in some building made with hands.

Acts 17:24 — God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands.

Ezra 3:7

7 They gave money also unto the masons, and to the carpenters; and meat, and drink, and oil, unto them of Zidon, and to them of Tyre, to bring cedar trees from Lebanon to the sea of Joppa, according to the grant that they had of Cyrus king of Persia.

Verse 7 is one of the most informative verses in Ezra, which might seem like an odd statement when you read verse 7. But verse 7 tells us something very

important about this small group of former exiles – they sincerely wanted to give their very best to God.

Even though this group was small and mostly poor, they set very high standards when it came to doing God’s work. They hired talented masons and carpenters, and they ordered the finest materials.

They were a focused people and a dedicated people; they were not a laid-back people or a casual people when it came to doing God’s work. Their desire was to give God their very best in everything they did.

Is that our desire? It will not happen by accident. Giving God our very best will either be our driving goal – or it won’t happen. This group left us a good example to follow.

But, unfortunately, they also left us a bad example.

We are looking now at the first return. The third return under Nehemiah occurred about 90 years later, and the prophet Malachi preached about 10 years after that.

About 100 years after the people here in verse 7 were intent on giving God their very best, Malachi described a very different situation:

Malachi 1:7-8 – Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.

In short, there had been a decline in their desire to please God and give God their very best.

We need to always be on guard against that same sad decline. If we are giving God our very best today, then that is wonderful – but we need to always remain focused and dedicated on giving God our very best. The priorities of the returned exiles changed over time, and we can see the result of that change in Malachi.

Solomon had also used cedar trees from Lebanon in constructing the first temple, but he had paid for that timber himself. Here the timber was paid for, not by King Solomon, but by King Cyrus. God's people had fallen from their former glory because of their disobedience.

The Babylonian exile had provided many important lessons to God's people. One such lesson was the danger of idolatry. Idolatry had been a major cause for the exile, but interestingly, idolatry was never the problem after the exile that it had been before the exile.

A second lesson they learned from the exile, and a lesson that is shown here, is the danger of pride and self-sufficiency.

We know that God hates a proud look (Proverbs 6:17), but why? What is it about pride that causes God to so frequently warn us against it?

The answer is that pride is dangerous – in fact, pride may be the greatest danger. Why? Because pride and self-sufficiency blind us to God and to our desperate need for God.

We should be thankful for reminders that we are not self-sufficient. We should be thankful for events that deflate our pride. Why? Because those reminders and those events cause us to look to God for our salvation and not to ourselves. They remind us to rely on the arm of God rather than the arm of man.

The prophets prior to the exile all spoke to a people who were blinded by their pride and by their arrogance. We are now reading about a very different people. The exile had created a very different people – a people much closer to God and a people who understood their total dependence on God.

In our introduction, we mentioned that a theme in this book is the link between the events in Ezra and the establishment of the eternal kingdom in Acts 2 as prophesied in Daniel 2 and Isaiah 2. We have already seen some examples of that theme in this chapter.

Verse 7 has two links to other times – one that points **backward** to the first temple and one that points **forward** to the church that was to come.

The backward link, of course, is that the same materials that had been used for the first temple were being used for the second temple.

What about the link to the church? Listen as Isaiah describes the church in similar terms to verse 7:

Isaiah 60:11-13 – Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, **that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations**, with their kings led in procession. ... **The glory of Lebanon shall come to you**, the cypress, the plane, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious.

Why did the temple exist in the first place? Why was there a first temple? Why was there a second temple?

Hebrews 8:5 – Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.

Why was the revealed pattern so important? Because the temple was a shadow of heavenly things. Is the revealed pattern for proper worship any less important today now that we are members of that spiritual reality – the eternal kingdom of Christ?

Everything about the Old Testament is pointing forward. That is what Hebrews tells us. We need to always be looking for those spiritual realities in the shadows we see in Ezra and in the rest of the Old Testament.

Isaiah 60:11 describes the church as a place where “**thy gates shall be open continually**; they shall not be shut day nor night; that men may bring unto thee the forces of the Gentiles, and **that their kings may be brought.**”

Do we find a similar description of the church anywhere in the New Testament? Yes, we do.

Revelation 21:24-25 – “And the nations of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it: and **the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it.** And **the gates of it shall not be shut at all by day:** for there shall be no night there.”

What are those verses describing? Revelation 21:2 is very helpful in answering that question: “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, **coming down from God out of heaven,** prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

That phrase “coming down from God **out of heaven**” tells us two important things about Revelation 21. First, it is not describing heaven, and second, it is not describing something in heaven. Verse 2 could not be any clearer on that point.

What then is being described? Revelation 21 is describing a people rather than a place. We know that from the descriptions in Revelation 21 (the frequent use of the number 12, for example) that God’s people are being described.

What people is being described? That one is easy. Verse 9 says, “Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb’s wife.” Revelation 21 is describing the church.

But **when?** When are God’s people being described. I think verses 24-25 are an important clue – **the gates are open!** People are still being invited in! Will that be true of the church in heaven after the end of the world? No, but it is certainly true of the church here and now.

Ezra 3 is pointing forward to the church, and Isaiah 60 is pointing forward to the church. Revelation 21 later describes that church after its establishment using the very same language!

Ezra 3:8-9

8 Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward,

to set forward the work of the house of the LORD. 9 Then stood Jeshua with his sons and his brethren, Kadmiel and his sons, the sons of Judah, together, to set forward the workmen in the house of God: the sons of Henadad, with their sons and their brethren the Levites.

We are now in the second month of the second year after the first return, and verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua began to “set forward the work of the house of the Lord.”

Solomon also began building his temple in the second month (1 Kings 6:1). This was the month after Passover, or April-May on our calendar, and it was the beginning of the dry season, which made it the ideal time to start building.

Even so, as will see, the people here did little more than repair the foundation until nearly 20 years later during the time of Haggai and Zechariah in 520 BC, at which time they made another beginning (Ezra 5:2) two decades after this beginning.

What caused the delay?

At this point, if this was all we knew, then we might think we could blame it on the Levites. Verse 8 tells us that Zerubbabel and Jeshua delegated the work to them, and maybe the Levites dropped the ball. The job was delegated to them, and then nothing happened for 20 years. (I could insert a “deacon” joke here!) But that is not what happened.

We will see what really happened when we get to Chapter 4, but even here in these verses we know we can't blame it just on the Levites. In verse 8, the leaders set forward the work, and in verse 9 the leaders set forward the workman. In each case, the word used refers to supervision. Everything that was done was being overseen very carefully by those in charge. This was not a case in which work was delegated and then forgotten. This was being done right in that the work was being delegated and then carefully overseen. They were all getting off to a very good start!

But before we proceed, we need to consider yet another Levite puzzle! Notice in verse 8 that the Levites who were appointed were at least age 20. That little detail raises some questions.

- Numbers 4:3 says that the Levites began their work at age 30.
 - Numbers 8:24 says that the Levites began their work at age 25.
 - 1 Chronicles 23:24 says that the Levites began their work at age 20 (as we also find here in Ezra 3:8).

How is all of this explained? Is it 20, 25 or 30?

As for the difference between 30 years and 25 years in Numbers 4 and Numbers 8, the best explanation (and the one that the rabbis adopted) is that the Levites had a 5-year apprenticeship.

But how about the change to 20 years in 1 Chronicles 24 and Ezra 3?

I think Numbers 8 answers that question. Numbers 8:24 places the starting age at 25 and places the retirement age at 50. But Numbers 8:26 says that the retired Levites could assist the others. I think those Levites who were younger than 25 were most likely also there just as assistants.

That view is confirmed by 1 Chronicles 23:3, which says that the Levites were numbered starting at age 30, suggesting that age 30 was still the operative age. But it seems that there was both a five-year apprenticeship dropping the starting age to 25, and an earlier five year period of assistance, dropping the starting age down to 20. Also, with so few Levites, it was important to start them all working as soon as possible.

Verse 9 shows us that the leading priestly and Levitical families were in charge of the work, as we would expect. We first met Kadmiel and Hodaviah back in Ezra 2:40. Henadad is mentioned in Nehemiah 10:9.

Ezra 3:10-13

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise the LORD, after the ordinance of David king of Israel. 11 And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the LORD; because he is good, for his mercy endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and chief of the fathers, who were ancient men, that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: 13 So that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people: for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off.

Verses 10-13 show the reaction of the people when the new foundation was laid – they praised God, they sang together, they gave thanks, they shouted with a great shout, and they wept with a loud voice.

Verse 11 quotes Psalm 100:5 – “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Jeremiah had earlier prophesied about this very event.

Jeremiah 33:10-11 – Thus saith the LORD; Again there shall be heard in this place, which ye say shall be desolate without man and without beast, even in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, that are desolate, without man, and without inhabitant, and without beast, the voice of joy, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the bride, the voice of them that shall say, Praise the LORD of hosts: for the LORD is good; for his mercy endureth for ever: and of them that shall bring the sacrifice of praise into the house of the LORD. For I will cause to return the captivity of the land, as at the first, saith the LORD.

The hearts of the people were full of praise and full of thanksgiving even though construction had just started. As someone once said, “true faith praises God even before the answer has materialized.” True faith prays for rain – and then carries an umbrella! These people knew with certainty that the temple would be rebuilt even while they were still looking at just a pile of rubble.

There were among the people some older priests, older Levites, and older family heads who had seen the original temple with their own eyes. The temple had been destroyed in 587, and the current year was 536, or 51 years after the temple was destroyed. Keep in mind that the captivity started in 605, when Daniel was carried off, but the temple was not destroyed until 18 years after that.

So, for someone now present to have seen the temple with his own eyes and remembered it, he could have been as young as 60, but he was likely closer to 70 or 80, having been carried off to exile in the years prior to the destruction of the city. Daniel, for example, at this time was in his eighties (but, as we have discussed, he seems to have stayed behind in Babylon).

Verses 12-13 are touching. Those who remembered Solomon's temple (called "the first house" in verse 12) wept. Why? Presumably it was because of the difference between that grand edifice built by Solomon and the much less grand version that would now be constructed. They likely had feelings both of longing and regret. Longing for what they had lost, and regret for their sins that had caused it to be destroyed, and also for their inability to restore all of its former glory.

Haggai and Zechariah would preach about this same sorrowful attitude about 20 years later:

Haggai 2:3 – Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes?

Zechariah 4:10 – For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice, and shall see the plumb line in the hand of Zerubbabel.

Yes, there was sadness, but great joy was mixed in with that sadness.

There is a lesson for us in this. One of the surest ways to derail the work of the church is to focus entirely on the good old days.

- Back in the good old days, there was a church on every corner, and every building was full.

- Back in the good old days, we had gospel meetings that lasted for weeks, meeting twice a day, and hundreds were baptized.
- Back in the good old days, we didn't have the problems we have today with all of the liberal ideas in the church.

And on and on we could go.

First, the obvious point is that the good old days were not entirely good, and much of what we remember about them is not entirely accurate.

Here is how one author summed up the good old days:

In earlier days preachers actually did evangelistic work and churches edified themselves. And that is when we made our greatest growth ... Then it was the old Jerusalem gospel preached under a brush arbor, in a school building, a home, or a simple meeting house. In those days, brethren knew something.

And when was that written? 1953 (*Firm Foundation*, June 2, 1953)! What we may see today as the good old days were not seen that way by all of those living in them.

But second, if the good old days were, in fact, the golden age of the church, that is not the age in which we now find ourselves. Perhaps we are more like these exiles, looking at a current situation that is much less grand than what we saw 50 or more years ago.

How will we react to that? With paralysis and weeping? We can't do what we did before, so therefore we should do nothing? Or shouldn't we instead react with joy and thanksgiving for the wonderful opportunities that God had now given us to do his will and expand his kingdom.

What God seeks is faithfulness, and obedience, and trust. And we can give those things to God without regard to how different things are today from how they were in the good old days, whether that is how things really are or just how we remember them looking back through our rose colored glasses.

The final phrase in verse 13 is ominous: "the noise was heard afar off." Who do you think was hearing all of that joyful shouting? And how would they respond? The opening verse of Chapter 4 will tell us.

LESSON 11

Ezra 4

From Ezra 4 until the end of Nehemiah there is nothing but conflict.

We might hope that we can avoid conflict in the service of God, but, if we did, we would be the first. And if our goal is to just avoid conflict, then we are most likely not doing much in the service of God. Jesus certainly did not avoid conflict. Some decide that the safest course is to just do nothing in an attempt to avoid all conflict (and we will see that same attitude in Ezra), but all that strategy does is create conflict with God. We must be focused on pleasing God and doing God's will, and that will very often create conflict, both from inside and from outside.

Yes, we much preach the word in love, but I like what R. L. Whiteside said about that:

"Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people."

Preaching the word in love does not mean that we will avoid all conflict. What it means is that conflict should not be our goal when we preach the word.

From this point on in Ezra, nothing that these people attempt to do for God will go unchallenged. Does that sound familiar?

The conflict we see in the remainder of this book, and how the people of God react to that conflict (sometimes in the right way, and sometimes in the wrong way) will provide some valuable lessons for us today.

Ezra 4:1-3

Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel; 2 Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither. 3 But Zerubbabel, and Jeshua, and the rest of the chief of the fathers of Israel, said unto them, Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel, as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.

The "adversaries" in verse 1 are the same people we looked at in Ezra 3:3.

Verse 2 gives us a big clue as to the origin of some of these adversaries: "we have been sacrificing to him ever since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assyria who brought us here."

The king of Assyria in 722 when the northern tribes were carried off was Sargon II. His three immediate successors were Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal. The second of that group, Esarhaddon, reigned from 681 to 669 BC

We know that Sargon II repopulated the northern kingdom after he carried off the Israelites, and verse 2 here is telling us that Esarhaddon must have continued that same policy, including moving some further south into Syria and Palestine. In verse 10 of this chapter will see a resettlement by Ashurbanipal, who reigned after Esarhaddon.

So what does this mean? What is meant is that some, and perhaps many, of these surrounding adversaries of the Jews had been forcibly settled in the area by the Assyrians after the Assyrians had emptied the land of its former inhabitants, the Jews of the northern tribes. When they arrived, the land had been largely empty, and they had been given the land by a royal edict from an Assyrian king. Now these Jews had arrived with a royal edict of their own from a Persian king to take land that they claimed was their land by priority of ownership. No one should be surprised by the conflict that resulted.

But verse 2 is interesting for another reason – for what these resettled Assyrians say to the Jews: "for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him." How can we explain that? How did they know anything about God? 2 Kings 17 answers that question.

2 Kings 17:24-28 – And the king of Assyria brought men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria instead of the children of Israel: and they possessed Samaria, and dwelt in the cities thereof. 25 And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew some of them. 26 Wherefore they spake to the king of Assyria, saying, The nations which thou hast removed, and placed in the cities of Samaria, know not the manner of the God of the land: therefore he hath sent lions among them, and, behold, they slay them, because they know not the manner of the God of the land. 27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, Carry thither one of the priests whom ye brought from thence; and let them go and dwell there, and let him teach them the manner of the God of the land. 28 Then one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and dwelt in Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD.

So even these resettled Assyrians had no excuse! They had learned (the hard way!) how to fear God.

One of the themes of Ezra is the importance of maintaining purity, and we see that theme here. These neighbors (tellingly already called adversaries in verse 1) approach the Israelites and say to them, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do." How often today do we hear that same ecumenical plea!

And how did the Jews respond? "Sure! Come on in! Let's all just agree to disagree! Grab a guitar and we can all just celebrate Jesus together!" No, that is not what they said at all.

What the Jews said in verse 3 was, "Ye have nothing to do with us to build an house unto our God; but we ourselves together will build unto the LORD God of Israel."

The Jews knew very well that these people, despite their claims, did not worship God as the Jews did. How did they know that? They had eyes! They

could read God's word, and they could observe how their neighbors worshiped – and what they worshiped.

Let's keep reading in 2 Kings 17.

2 Kings 17:33-41 – So they feared the LORD but also served their own gods, after the manner of the nations from among whom they had been carried away. To this day they do according to the former manner. They do not fear the LORD, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the LORD commanded the children of Jacob, whom he named Israel. The LORD made a covenant with them and commanded them, "You shall not fear other gods or bow yourselves to them or serve them or sacrifice to them, but you shall fear the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt with great power and with an outstretched arm. You shall bow yourselves to him, and to him you shall sacrifice. And the statutes and the rules and the law and the commandment that he wrote for you, you shall always be careful to do. You shall not fear other gods, and you shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the LORD your God, and he will deliver you out of the hand of all your enemies." However, they would not listen, but they did according to their former manner. So these nations feared the LORD and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children's children—as their fathers did, so they do to this day.

Yes, they feared God, but they also "did according to their former manner" and "served their carved images." And that is not something God wanted his people to just "agree to disagree" about!

The Jews had a choice to make – peace with their neighbors or peace with God; conflict with their neighbors or conflict with God. Should they accept these neighbors into their group along with their false worship, or should they not? Should they seek peace at any price even when that price is their faithfulness and obedience to God?

I think we all know the right answer in Ezra 4, but do we know the right answer when this same problem comes to our own door? Do we know the right answer when our own neighbors, many of whom have cast the word of God behind their backs, show up and say, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do"?

The world says there are many churches; the Bible says there is one. The world says we can each go the church of our choice; the Bible says that we must obey the gospel so that God will add us to the church of his choice. The world says there are many paths to God; the Bible says there is one and only one. The world says that each of us is free to worship God however we choose; the Bible says that we must worship God in spirit and in truth.

What do we do when the world shows up at our door and says, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do"? We have an example of what to do here in Ezra 4.

But are we really supposed to say today what they said way back then? Well, look who is doing the talking in verse 3 – Zerubbabel and Jeshua. We have already looked at those two, the descendant of royalty and the High Priest, and we have seen how they are used to prefigure the perfect King and High Priest who was to come.

These people had a big choice, and it is a choice that comes time and time again to the people of God – would they trust in God or would they trust in man? Would they embrace their neighbors for security, or would they look to God for security?

Their ancestors had often looked to Egypt or Assyria for help rather than to God – what would these descendants do? Here they made the right decision – they determined to trust in the arm of God rather than the arm of man.

Here is the answer they gave to their neighbors in verse 3: "You have nothing to do with us in building a house to our God; but we alone will build to the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus the king of Persia has commanded us."

But that answer is so harsh! It is so black and white! It is so unloving! But is it? Was their answer unloving? Many today would say it was, but of course we know it was not. It was the most loving answer they could give. First, it shows their love for God and their desire to obey God no matter the consequences. But second, it showed love for their neighbors. The most unloving thing they

could have done would have been to tell those neighbors they were right with God when they were not right with God.

But notice that their answer in verse 3 adds something else – “as king Cyrus the king of Persia hath commanded us.” Why did they say that?

One reason have already mentioned is that the two groups had dueling royal decrees. Another possible reason is that Cyrus’ decree had not charged these neighbors with rebuilding the temple, and so technical adherence to that decree would prevent the Jews from working with those neighbors. But there must be more to it than that because we know that these exiles would not have worked with these neighbors even if Cyrus’ decree had been silent on the issue.

A more important reason to mention the decree of Cyrus is that the Jews knew who was really behind that decree. We were told in the opening verses that God had stirred Cyrus to make that decree, and we know that the decree was made at the time that Jeremiah had prophesied it would occur. Also, we know that God through Isaiah had mentioned Cyrus by name hundreds of years before Cyrus was born. In short, Cyrus’ decree was God’s decree, and that is how these people properly saw it.

As we said in an earlier lesson, the phrase “we have been sacrificing to him” in verse 2 seems to confirm that there was most likely an altar already in place before the exiles began to build their own altar, and verse 2 likewise confirms that that previous altar would have been defiled and not built according to God’s word, which means it would have been torn down before the restored altar was built.

And that is yet another lesson in restoration. True restoration begins by removing whatever is false. True restoration does not seek to reform falsehood, but rather it removes falsehood – and then it builds in its place that which is true.

Ezra 4:4-5

4 Then the people of the land weakened the hands of the people of Judah, and troubled them in building, 5 And hired counsellors against them, to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

Yes, this is the same group who two verses earlier said, "Let us build with you, for we worship your God as you do!" Verses 4-5 explain why that group was called "adversaries" in verse 1. The knives have come out and the opposition begins in earnest.

Remember that Ezra is writing this about 80 years after these events in Chapter 4 occurred. In just a moment, Ezra will look back over the history from his time to this time and illustrate other examples of opposition that occurred during those 80 year that followed. Why does Ezra do that? Because those later examples will completely justify the response that the Jews gave in verse 3 to the offer of help in verse 2.

The phrase "people of the land" in verse 4 is interesting. To the Jews, that phrase later became a synonym for the ignorant or the vulgar with regard to knowledge of the law. Those who did not know or follow the law were called the people of the land.

The phrase "weakened the hands" in verse 4 is the same word that was applied against Jeremiah in 38:4 by his enemies. There is nothing wrong with weakening the hands of those opposed to God (as Jeremiah was doing), but here it is God's people whose hands are being weakened – and we must never let the world do that to us.

The counselors in verse 5 were likely Persian officials bribed to obstruct the building in every possible way.

This pressure against the Jews would continue for about 16 years (until 520 BC), and as we will see, it eventually stopped the work on the temple. But it did not stop all building activities – Haggai will later tell us that some of the

Jews were much more focused on their own paneled homes than they were on the house of God.

The mention of Darius in verse 5 and again in verse 24 marks the intervening verses as an excursus or a parenthetical. We talked about this at length in our introductory lessons.

Ezra does not return to the specific opposition of verses 4-5 until verse 24. The remaining verses in Chapter 4 discuss later oppositions to the building of the walls under the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, husband of Queen Esther) and the reign of Artaxerxes I, who allowed both Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

Ezra 4:6

6 And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes I) was the Persian king who reigned from 486 until 465, following the reign of Darius I. Ahasuerus was the husband of Queen Esther.

All verse 6 tells us is that the opposition and letter writing by their hostile neighbors continued through the reign of this king. We are not told whether they received any response to their letter.

When we get to our study of Esther, we will see that Ahasuerus had some other things on his mind! When Darius died at the end of 486 BC, Egypt rebelled, and Xerxes had to march west to suppress the revolt and finally regained control by the end of 483. Xerxes is best known for his massive invasion of Greece as recounted in Herodotus. His navy and army were defeated by the Greeks at Salamis in 480 and at Plataea in 479.

Where does the name Xerxes come from? Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the Persian name Khshayarsha, for which the Greek form is Xerxes. While the Hebrews would carefully match letter for letter in coming up with the Hebrew version of a Persian name, the Greeks followed a different procedure. When Greeks couldn't pronounce a foreign name, they just came up with a new

name that was more Greek sounding. By that process, perhaps I should just start referring to Ashurbanipal as Bill or Ted!

The tombs of these Persian kings are located in modern-day Iran. They were looted during the days of Alexander, but the tombs themselves remain to this day.

We will have a lot more to say about Xerxes when we get to the book of Esther, but this is all that Ezra has to say about him.

Ezra 4:7-8

7 And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue. 8 Rehum the chancellor and Shimshai the scribe wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king in this sort:

Artaxerxes was the Persian king who followed Xerxes I, and he reigned from 464 until 424. He became king by murdering his older brother.

It was during his reign that Ezra returned in 458 and Nehemiah returned in 445. Again, we are told that the opposition continued into this king's reign, but here we are given more detail, including a copy of an actual letter sent to the king by the opponents of the Jews.

A major concern during the first half of Artaxerxes' reign was an Egyptian revolt that began in 460 and that was supported by the Greeks. That revolt in Egypt would have caused the king to listen very seriously to these charges of sedition in nearby Palestine.

In Chapter 2 we saw the wall of honor. Here we see a wall of dishonor, as the Bible records the names of the opponents: Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, Rehum, and Shimshai.

From verse 8 here in Ezra 4 until Ezra 6:18, the text is in Aramaic (called the "Syrian tongue" in verse 7). (Recall that we also saw a lengthy Aramaic section in Daniel.)

Why the switch in language? Most likely it was because Ezra's source documents, the letters and the replies, were written in Aramaic – as Ezra explicitly tell us. The Jews became bilingual during the exile, and so, most likely, Ezra simply recorded his comments on the letters in Aramaic to avoid switching back and forth between Hebrew and Aramaic.

Ezra 4:9-10

9 Then wrote Rehum the chancellor, and Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their companions; the Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, 10 And the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Asnappar brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria, and the rest that are on this side the river, and at such a time.

Verses 9-10 probably came from the official summary of the letter that would have been located on the outside of the papyrus scroll.

The “noble Asnappar” in verse 10 is King Ashurbanipal, who ruled Assyria from 669 until 633. He was famous for his large library in Ninevah. He is not named elsewhere in the Bible, but he is likely the king who freed Manasseh in 2 Chronicles 33.

The KJV has a mistranslation in verse 9 where it reads “the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites.” The word translated “Dehavites” really just means “that is,” so that the phrase should be “Elamites of Susa,” in contrast to the other people of Susa. Susa took part in a revolt against Ashurbanipal and was completely destroyed in 640 BC.

Many of these people were descendants of deportees who had been removed from their homelands nearly two centuries earlier – and yet they remember and stress their origins in this letter.

There is no historical support for the notion today that people in the Middle East will eventually agree to just forget the past and live together in peace if we can just send enough politicians over to talk to them. In fact, the major

schisms in the Middle East today all trace back to events that occurred centuries or even millennia ago.

The actual text of the letter appears in verses 11-16.

LESSON 12

When we ended last week, we were in the middle of a parenthetical section in which Ezra is giving some other examples of how the Jews' trouble making neighbors were causing problems for them. One way they did that was to send false reports back to the king, as they did during the reign of Artaxerxes.

The actual text of their letter appears in verses 11-16.

Ezra 4:11-16

11 This is the copy of the letter that they sent unto him, even unto Artaxerxes the king; Thy servants the men on this side the river, and at such a time. 12 Be it known unto the king, that the Jews which came up from thee to us are come unto Jerusalem, building the rebellious and the bad city, and have set up the walls thereof, and joined the foundations. 13 Be it known now unto the king, that, if this city be builded, and the walls set up again, then will they not pay toll, tribute, and custom, and so thou shalt endamage the revenue of the kings. 14 Now because we have maintenance from the king's palace, and it was not meet for us to see the king's dishonour, therefore have we sent and certified the king; 15 That search may be made in the book of the records of thy fathers: so shalt thou find in the book of the records, and know that this city is a rebellious city, and hurtful unto kings and provinces, and that they have moved sedition within the same of old time: for which cause was this city destroyed. 16 We certify the king that, if this city be builded again, and the walls thereof set up, by this means thou shalt have no portion on this side the river.

At this point, we should probably pause and consider an important reminder about inspiration. Yes, the Bible is the inspired word of God, but not every statement in the Bible is true.

For example, the statement by Satan to Eve in Genesis 3:4 ("You will not surely die") was not a true statement. (It directly contradicted what God said in Genesis 2:17.) While inspiration tells us that Satan made that statement in Genesis 3:4, the statement itself is false.

Likewise here, inspiration tells us that these verses accurately record the contents of this letter, but as for the statements in the letter, we know that

the letter contains false accusations, false statements, and false concern for the king's welfare. The contents of this letter are not inspired statements from God. All that inspiration tells us about this letter is that Ezra accurately reported it (just as Moses accurately recorded the words of Satan in Genesis 3).

“The whole letter is inflammatory and a gross exaggeration and cannot be used to determine Jewish activity other than the fact that some building was underway.”

The phrase “from thee to us” in verse 12 suggests that the Jews under discussion here were the ones who first came from the king himself, which would be Ezra’s group who returned in 458. (Because Nehemiah had a specific royal mandate to rebuild the city, this letter complaining about rebuilding efforts could not refer to his return.)

In Nehemiah 1:3, Nehemiah received news that the wall was broken down and the gates burned. That may have been the wall that was started here, and its destruction may have been the result of Artaxerxes’ reply in verses 18-22.

Remember that we have moved forward in time here in Ezra 4. The foundations in verse 12 are not the foundations of the temple. By the reign of Artaxerxes, the new temple had been standing for half a century. Instead, verse 12 is talking about the foundations of the city.

The word “Jews” in verse 12 is interesting. Today we use that word to refer to the entire Hebrew ethnicity, but that was not always the case. The word itself comes from Judah, just one of the twelve tribes, and later came to apply to the two Southern tribes, which also included Benjamin. (Simeon was also located in the South, but that tribe was divided and scattered and eventually absorbed into Judah. Jacob had said in Genesis 49:7 that Simeon would be divided and scattered.) Here in verse 12, the word “Jew” applies to the entirety of the race, and it may have been one of the first such uses of the word.

Three different words for taxes are used in verse 13. (Some things never change!) They refer to a monetary tax, a payment in kind (oil, grain, etc.), and

a duty tax. After his costly campaign against the Greeks, Artaxerxes could not afford to overlook any revenue. The opposition here played on the king's fears that he might lose revenue or perhaps even lose the whole western province (verse 16). Of course, there is no mention of their true motives, which were not to help the king collect taxes or keep his kingdom intact!

Estimates suggest that between 20 to 35 million dollars worth of taxes were collected annually by the Persian king. The Fifth Satrapy, which included Palestine, had to pay the smallest amount of the western satrapies. The Persians took much of the gold and silver coins and melted them down to be stored as bullion. Very little of the taxes returned to benefit the provinces. (Again, not much has changed!)

The phrase "we have maintenance from the king's palace" in verse 14 is literally "we have eaten the salt of the palace," which is how the ESV renders it. Salt was often used to seal covenants, and so came to symbolize loyalty. "Eating the salt of" was an idiom for "being in the service of" or "receiving a salary from." Our word "salary" comes from the Latin word *salarium*, which means "salt money."

The Persian kings considered themselves the successors of the Babylonian kings, which is why the Babylonian kings are referred to as their fathers or predecessors in verse 15.

The book of records in verse 15 will play a major role in the book of Esther. What would it contain that is relevant to this letter? It described many revolts by the Jews! Revolts by Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, Zedekiah, and possibly even by Hezekiah. In short, this book would not have helped the Jewish cause – and we know that it did not help their cause. Verse 19 tells us that these records were behind the response that came back from the king.

Verses 17-22 give us the king's reply to the letter in verses 11-16.

Ezra 4:17-22

17 Then sent the king an answer unto Rehum the chancellor, and to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their companions that dwell in Samaria, and unto the rest beyond the river, Peace, and at such a time. 18 The letter which ye sent unto us hath been plainly read before me. 19 And I commanded, and search hath been made, and it is found that this city of old time hath made insurrection against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made therein. 20 There have been mighty kings also over Jerusalem, which have ruled over all countries beyond the river; and toll, tribute, and custom, was paid unto them. 21 Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded, until another commandment shall be given from me. 22 Take heed now that ye fail not to do this: why should damage grow to the hurt of the kings?

Letters took about a week to travel back and forth between Samaria and Persia.

Apparently, the king believes that the threats against his reign are genuine, and so he orders that the rebuilding efforts be stopped. As we suggested, one reason the king may have taken this threat seriously was because of the brewing trouble nearby in Egypt.

But this response by Artaxerxes raises the question of contradictory orders – how could this be the same king who would later send Nehemiah to rebuild the walls?

The answer is in verse 21 – the king said that the city would not be rebuilt “until another commandment shall be given from me.”

Esther 8:8 and Daniel 6:8 tell us that “an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked.” What that means is that without this providential addition, Nehemiah would have had a very difficult time getting the king’s approval for his plans to rebuild.

The situation that moved Nehemiah to pray and act may have been the same discouraging events described here.

Ezra 4:23

23 Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum, and Shimshai the scribe, and their companions, they went up in haste to Jerusalem unto the Jews, and made them to cease by force and power.

In verse 22, the king had ordered the Jewish adversaries to “take heed now that ye fail not to do this” act of stopping the rebuilding. That is one order the king certainly did not need to worry about being followed!

Verse 23 tells us that the adversaries showed no slackness at all in obeying the king's command – they went in haste to do so. (But isn't that always the way with troublemakers! They are seldom slothful!)

Proverbs 6:18 tells us that one of the things that God hates is "feet that be swift in running to mischief."

By force and power the adversaries of the Jews caused the rebuilding to end. They likely also destroyed the work that had already been done, which may be the destruction reported in Nehemiah 1:3 – “the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.”

Notice that the king had told them only to halt the rebuilding – he had not given them permission to destroy what had already been rebuilt, but that seems to have been what they did.

This was not the only time that God's people were met by force and power. But both they and we need to remember that no force or power can defeat God or Christ or the kingdom of Christ.

Romans 8:31 - "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

Ezra 4:24

24 Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

The word “then” at the beginning of verse 24 sounds as if this verse is describing what happened after verse 23, but we know that can’t be the case because Darius in verse 24 reigned before Artaxerxes. Instead, as we discussed earlier, verses 6-23 should have parentheses or brackets around them. That parenthetical statement was inserted by Ezra to show the real attitude of those who offered their help in verse 2 and to show the depth of their adversity against the Jews. Verse 24 is now simply picking up from verse 5, which also mentions Darius.

And so the work that had started under King Cyrus has now ceased because of the opposition of the Jews’ neighbors. That work would remain halted through the remainder of Cyrus’ reign and through the reigns of Cambyses II and Smerdis. It would not begin again until the second year of Darius the Great’s reign, which would be in 520 – the same year that Haggai and Zechariah began to preach about the people’s neglect of the temple rebuilding project. The work would be completed five years later in 515.

This date in verse 24 of “the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia” is significant. During his first two years, Darius fought numerous battles against nine rebels, as recounted in his famous Behistun Inscription. Only after the stabilization of the Persian Empire could efforts to rebuild the temple be permitted.

Darius consolidated the administration of the vast Persian Empire, setting up satraps, introducing coinage, and establishing the famous royal road from Susa to Sardis and a system of mounted couriers, whose description by Herodotus forms the motto of the U.S. postal system – “These are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.”

Chapter 4 ends on a discouraging note – “Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem.” We will see a change of heart in Chapter 5, and, as with all such changes of heart, it will begin with the proclamation of God’s word.

Ezra 5:1-2

Then the prophets, Haggai the prophet, and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied unto the Jews that were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, even unto them. 2 Then rose up Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and began to build the house of God which is at Jerusalem: and with them were the prophets of God helping them.

There is a jump in time between the beginning of Ezra 4 and the beginning of Ezra 5. When Chapter 5 opens, work on the temple has now been stopped for about 16 years after it was started at the beginning of Chapter 4.

How do we know that? Because the last verse of Chapter 4 tells us that we are now in the second year of King Darius, which is 520 BC. Also, we can look at the book of Haggai, who is mentioned in verse 1. Haggai 1:1 begins with the same date as Ezra 4:24 – “In the second year of Darius the king, in the sixth month, in the first day of the month.”

At the beginning of Chapter 4, we were in the reign of Cyrus. At the beginning of Chapter 5, we are now in the reign of Darius. The two Persian kings in between, Cambyses II and Smerdis, have come and gone. Cambyses died on his way back from Egypt rushing to remove the supposed imposter, Smerdis. That imposter was soon killed by Darius the Great, who then took the throne. The Behistun Inscription shows Darius with his foot on Smerdis. At the beginning of Ezra 5, we are in the second year of Darius’ reign.

It seems that the Jews had used the opposition of their neighbors as an excuse to do nothing for God’s house, and instead had turned their focus to building their own houses. It seems that they had given in to the fear we saw in Ezra 3:3 and to the discouragement we saw in Ezra 4:4-5.

We find from Haggai and Zechariah that the people had set aside spiritual concerns in favor of physical concerns. What was the cure for that fear? What was the cure for that discouragement? Simple – the bold proclamation of the word of God.

Haggai and Zechariah declared God's word to the people, and, as we will see, God's word woke them from their stupor and cured their fear and their discouragement. If we experience fear and discouragement today, the solution is the same – the bold proclamation of God's word.

Zerubbabel and Jeshua in verse 2 are the same two leaders we have seen before. They are mentioned many times in Haggai and Zechariah, and, as we have discussed, Zechariah uses them as a figure of the perfect high priest and king who was to come.

Let's pause for a moment and consider the two prophets who are mentioned in verse 1 – Haggai and Zechariah. Their preaching was so effective that work on the temple resumed almost immediately. And their books provide the backdrop and the context for Ezra 5.

What was the message of Haggai?

From the opening verses of their two books, we know that Haggai began his ministry two months before Zechariah began his. Haggai preached four sermons that we know about within the space of about three months in 520 B.C., and then disappeared from public view. His short ministry was certainly a productive one!

We don't know too much about Haggai, but Haggai 2:3 might suggest that Haggai had himself seen the original temple, in which case Haggai was likely in his 70's and possibly older. That would also mean that Haggai had undertaken the difficult trip back to Jerusalem when he might have stayed comfortably behind in Babylon.

But as we read Haggai, we see that Haggai would have been the last person to place his own comfort ahead of his obedience to God. His message to the people was that they were placing their own comfort and prosperity ahead of God's temple.

Was God upset because of their prosperity? We know that he was not. Why? Because in Jeremiah 29:5-7 God had commanded them to prosper while they were in Babylon. God wants his people to prosper, but for God's people that prosperity should naturally lead to a heart of gratitude that overflows with obedience and faithfulness. For some, however, the opposite happens – their prosperity leads to a heart of pride in which they exalt their own accomplishments and forget God. Prosperity is dangerous!

These people had returned to Jerusalem with excitement and fervor, but then they had had built their homes and businesses and had settled down into a regular routine that did not include God. They had abandoned their original commitment, and Haggai proclaimed a message from God calling them back.

Haggai wanted the people of Israel to have a changed heart, which he knew would result in changed behavior. Too often we reverse that process – we seek changed behavior in the hope that it will result in a changed heart. That works sometimes, but the other way always works. If we change our heart into a heart of obedience and faithfulness to God, then a change in behavior will always come as a result.

The theme of Haggai is captured very well by one of its most famous verses – “Consider your ways!”

Haggai 1:5-9 – Now therefore thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink, but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and build the house; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the LORD. Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that is waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.

Haggai also contains an important lesson when it comes to purity, which is likewise a theme in Ezra. Ivory Soap may advertise that it is 99 and 44/100 percent pure, but there is a word for that – “impure.” If you start with a vat of sewage and add a teaspoon of pure water, you still have a vat of sewage. If

you start with a vat of pure water and add a teaspoon of sewage, what do you have? A vat of sewage.

Haggai proclaims that same message.

Haggai 2:11-14 – If one bear holy flesh in the skirt of his garment, and with his skirt do touch bread, or pottage, or wine, or oil, or any meat, shall it be holy? And the priests answered and said, No. Then said Haggai, If one that is unclean by a dead body touch any of these, shall it be unclean? And the priests answered and said, It shall be unclean.

Haggai ends with a beautiful Messianic prophecy of the perfect king who was to come from the line of King David, through Zerubbabel.

Haggai 2:21-23 – Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying, I will shake the heavens and the earth; 22 And I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms, and I will destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the heathen; and I will overthrow the chariots, and those that ride in them; and the horses and their riders shall come down, every one by the sword of his brother. 23 In that day, saith the LORD of hosts, will I take thee, O Zerubbabel, my servant, the son of Shealtiel, saith the LORD, and will make thee as a signet: for I have chosen thee, saith the LORD of hosts.

Haggai is proclaiming these messages at the exact time of Ezra 5.

LESSON 13

Last week, we started Ezra 5, and when class ended we were looking at the first two verses of Ezra 5.

Haggai and Zechariah are both mentioned in Ezra 5:1, and we were looking briefly at their messages for the people. What they told the people forms the backdrop for the events we see here in Ezra 5 and 6. Although the temple had been started in Ezra 3, that work had stopped due to the opposition of the Jews' neighbors. Ezra 4 gave us examples of the trouble they caused from this time all the way up to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So the work on the temple had been stopped for about 15 years, but then God sent Haggai and Zechariah to rouse the people from their slumber and to cause them to get busy doing what God wanted them to do – rebuild the temple. And that is what they did. What did Haggai and Zechariah say to create such a dramatic turn around?

Last week, we looked at the message of Haggai – consider your ways! Haggai told the people that their priorities had changed. They were no longer focused on God as they had been in Ezra 3, but now they were focused on themselves. Instead of building God's house, they were building their own homes. And we also saw how Haggai briefly lifted the prophetic curtain to show them the perfect king who was coming through the line of David and Zerubbabel.

What was the message of Zechariah?

First, we should note something very interesting about Haggai and Zechariah, something that tells us a bit about God reaches people. In some ways, Haggai and Zechariah were almost complete opposites!

Haggai was most likely quite old, having seen the original temples with his own eyes. In contrast, the evidence suggests that Zechariah was quite young – likely in his twenties when the temple was completed in 515 BC.

Also, the message of Haggai for the most part is very straightforward. It is very hard to misunderstand his message – Consider your ways! Get busy! Be pure! Do what is right!

But the message of Zechariah is very different! It is long and obscure. Zechariah is a difficult book. It has many signs and symbols and visions that are hard to understand, and, in fact, it has been called the Apocalypse of the Old Testament. The book of Revelation quotes Zechariah about 30 times making Zechariah second only to Ezekiel in that regard.

Zechariah is anything but straightforward, and it was especially so to those who initially received it. Why do I say that? Because when we study the book of Zechariah, we have the New Testament to help us understand it – they did not.

And even with the New Testament as a guide, many have given up trying to understand the book. One commentary I have is called *The Evasive Text: Zechariah 1-8 and the Frustrated Readers*. In the preface, the author of that commentary (if we can call it that!) confesses that he doesn't understand Zechariah! He writes:

"It is finally concluded that Zechariah lacks a concrete symbolic logic, defies grammatical conventions, and is unreadable as it stands - and always was this way."

That statement is, of course, completely wrong, as we saw when we studied those chapters, but it does show the problems some have had with this book. And the book doesn't get any easier after Chapter 8. Martin Luther began his commentary of Zechariah Chapter 14 by writing:

"In this chapter I surrender, for I am not certain of what the prophet treats."

One of the most important lessons we got from our own study of Zechariah is that the Bible can be understood. We went through that book verse by verse, using the rest of the Bible as our guide along with our own common sense and

secular history, and we made sense of that book, which many say is the most difficult book in the Bible to understand.

And one thing we saw is that a major goal of Zechariah was to open the eyes of the people to the great King who was coming from among them – a great king who was coming to bless the entire world and establish his unshakable, immovable, eternal kingdom.

Zechariah is second only to Isaiah in its number of Messianic prophecies. It is wonderful to think about the returned exiles listening to Zechariah in 520 BC. They were focused on their current situation and the need to restore their temple – and Zechariah was preaching Christ to them! It makes me think of Matthew 12:6 – “But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple.”

Here are some of the key prophecies in this short book, and, as I read them, think about the people who first heard them – who they were, where they were, and what they were doing. God lifted the curtain for them to provide a glimpse of the perfect priest-king who was to come – including both his eternal glory and his perfect sacrificial death.

Zechariah 3:8 – For, behold, I will bring forth my servant the BRANCH.

Zechariah 6:12-13 – And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the LORD of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD: Even he shall build the temple of the LORD; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.

Zechariah 9:9 – Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.

Zechariah 11:12-13 – And I said unto them, If ye think good, give me my price; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for my price thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said unto me, Cast it unto the potter: a goodly price that I was prized at of them. And I took the thirty pieces of silver, and cast them to the potter in the house of the LORD.

Zechariah 12:10 – And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.

Zechariah 13:7 – Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones.

Zechariah 14:8 – And it shall be in that day, that living waters shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be.

Zechariah proclaimed Christ to God's people 520 years before Christ came into this world – and some of the descendants of those people were ready and waiting when that great day came.

Luke 2:25 – And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.

Why? Why was the temple there? Why were faithful people there? Why were they waiting? How did they know? Ezra and Zechariah answer all of those questions.

Zechariah was preaching about Jesus at the same time as the events we see in Ezra 5, and his message, along with that of Haggai, caused the people to get back to work and do what God wanted them to do. What they were doing was vital to God's plan to later bless the entire world as he had promised to Abraham.

Now let's get back to Ezra 5.

Ezra 5:3-5

3 At the same time came to them Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and their companions, and said thus unto them, Who hath commanded you to build this house, and to make up this wall? 4 Then said we unto them after this manner, What are the names of the men that make this building? 5 But the eye of their God was upon the elders of the

Jews, that they could not cause them to cease, till the matter came to Darius: and then they returned answer by letter concerning this matter.

The first two years of Darius' reign were stormy ones due to numerous revolts. And so, it is natural that the authorities in the area would arrive to question the Jews about their building project and report their findings back to the king. Although their questions were logical (what are your names, and who gave you permission to do this?), their awareness of the project probably came from a report by the Jews' trouble making neighbors.

This was the type of construction normally carried out by royal edict and with resources of a monarch. The construction of a temple or any large structure without royal permission could signal an action against the interests of the throne, so this was considered a very serious matter.

The "eye of their God" in verse 5 refers to God's loving providential care over his people. We find the same expression elsewhere.

Deuteronomy 11:12 – A land which the LORD thy God careth for: **the eyes of the LORD** thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

Psalms 33:18 – Behold, **the eye of the LORD** is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy;

The message of this reference to the eyes of God is clear – God knows what was happening, and God cares about what was happening. Nothing escapes his notice. And God knows who is on his side, and who is not.

2 Timothy 2:19 – Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his.

Persian kings had spies who were called the King's Eye or the King's Ear. And so what we see here is that the eyes of God were watching the eyes and ears of Darius and what they were saying and doing to his people. Would the work stop again? Verse 5 gives us some important foreshadowing!

The whole transaction of sending the report to Darius, searching the records, and sending back a reply could have taken four or five months. (The letter

exchange would have taken just a few weeks, but the search would have taken longer.) The governor could have easily stopped the work while he waited for that reply, but he did not. Why? Verse 5 tells us why not – the providence of God.

The providence of God and how it works are often not easy to explain, but it is easy to recognize when we see it. We see it here in Ezra 5:5, and we see it today as God continues to providentially care for his people.

But providence is often a two-way street. God the does the main part, but he often relies on his people to also do their part by responding in faith and obedience.

And how did the people respond here? They continued to work even though they must have known that it all might be torn down again. Earlier they had become discouraged and stopped. What was different now? Haggai and Zechariah!

The people now had faith that God would continue to open doors for them, and unlike the previous 16 year period of idleness, they now had Haggai and Zechariah to stir them up and move them forward. God opened a door for them, and they rushed through it – yet another lesson for us!

Tatnai in verse 3 is one of the few Persian officials mentioned in the Bible for whom there is external evidence. A tablet has been found naming Tatnai and dated in the year 502. Tatnai himself is now known by extra-Biblical evidence to have been at this time governor of Beyond the River only, and thus subordinate to Ushtannu, who was governor of Beyond the River and Babylon together.

What we see next is the actual letter that Tatnai sent back to King Darius. In chapter 4, we saw an actual letter send to King Artaxerxes, but keep in mind that that letter in Ezra 4 was written long after this letter in Ezra 5. The letter in Ezra 4 concerned the rebuilding of the city and the walls, while this letter concerns the rebuilding of the temple.

Ezra 5:6-10

6 The copy of the letter that Tatnai, governor on this side the river, and Shetharboznai, and his companions the Apharsachites, which were on this side the river, sent unto Darius the king: 7 They sent a letter unto him, wherein was written thus; Unto Darius the king, all peace. 8 Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands. 9 Then asked we those elders, and said unto them thus, Who commanded you to build this house, and to make up these walls? 10 We asked their names also, to certify thee, that we might write the names of the men that were the chief of them.

Verses 6-10 contain the first part of the letter that the governor sent to Darius. What we find here is a report that is both well organized and official – a remarkable historical document even apart from its religious significance.

The letter from these Persian officials will present (1) an account of their inspection of the Jews' work, (2) a record of the questions they asked the Jews, (3) a lengthy account of the Jews' answer (in verses 11-16), and (4) a request that Darius check the official records concerning Cyrus' decree (verse 17).

To some it seems odd that the Persian officials would use the phrase “the great God” in verse 8. But we have already seen that the Persians liked to use the religious language of their subject peoples. Also, the same phrase has been found on Persian tablets.

The “great stones” in verse 8 might be translated as “smooth stones” or “polished stones,” although they may also have been large stones. There was something about the seriousness of this project that aroused the Persian's suspicions, and it may have been the size of the foundation stones.

As we have said, the questions (repeated in verses 9-10) were legitimate questions, and apparently the Jews were courteous in their responses. In fact, their response, which we will see next, may have played a role in the governor's positive attitude toward them. Yes, it was the providence of God, but yes – God helps those who help themselves.

The Apharsachites in verse 6 of the KJV is a transliteration of a Persian word meaning “officials” or “lesser governors,” or possibly meaning “messengers” or “investigators.” It is most likely **not** an ethnic group as no ethnic group by that name is known.

Verse 8 mentions that the temple was being built with stones and timbers. The first temple was also constructed this way – with three courses of stone and one of timber (1 Kings 6:36 and 7:12). Archaeologists have discovered other buildings constructed in this way, and they speculate that it may have been useful to counter earthquakes.

And these officials were writing down names! That was likely a bit worrying, as it always is when government officials start writing down names! But God also knew everyone's name!

The letter continues in verse 5.

Ezra 5:11-17

11 And thus they returned us answer, saying, We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth, and build the house that was builded these many years ago, which a great king of Israel builded and set up. 12 But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon. 13 But in the first year of Cyrus the king of Babylon the same king Cyrus made a decree to build this house of God. 14 And the vessels also of gold and silver of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple that was in Jerusalem, and brought them into the temple of Babylon, those did Cyrus the king take out of the temple of Babylon, and they were delivered unto one, whose name was Sheshbazzar, whom he had made governor; 15 And said unto him, Take these vessels, go, carry them into the temple that is in Jerusalem, and let the house of God be builded in his place. 16 Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building, and yet it is not finished. 17 Now therefore, if it seem good to the king, let there be search made in the king's treasure house, which is there at Babylon, whether it be so, that a decree was made of Cyrus the king to build this house of God at Jerusalem, and let the king send his pleasure to us concerning this matter.

Verses 11-17 contain a record of the Jews' answer to the questions posed by the Persian governor, and the first thing we note is that Jews knew their own history, and they understood their own role in that history. Starting with the construction of the temple by Solomon, they described how it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and how it was later ordered by Cyrus to be rebuilt.

Usually Cyrus is called the king of Persia (as in the decree itself in Ezra 1:2-4), but in verse 13 Cyrus is called the king of Babylon. Archaeologists have found ancient inscriptions that also refer to Cyrus as the king of Babylon, and that title makes more sense in this context. The Jewish history with Cyrus begins with his victory over Babylon. It was during his first year as King of Babylon (not his first year as King of Persia) when this decree was made.

Cyrus' decree was the Jews' best argument. They had legal backing for what they were doing, and that legal backing gave them certain rights under the Persian system. And they had a special legal backing – Cyrus was still honored as the great founder of the Persian Empire. In fact, history tells us that Darius made efforts to follow the policies of Cyrus to add legitimacy to his own reign.

In verse 14, Sheshbazzar is called the governor, and we have discussed him in our earlier lessons, and particularly the uncertainty regarding his relation to Zerubbabel, another governor. Part of that uncertainty comes from verse 16, which says that **Sheshbazzar** laid the foundations of the house of God. Ezra 3:10 suggests that the foundations were laid under **Zerubbabel**. What is the answer?

First, and this is a subtle point, Ezra 5:16 is a record of what the Persians told the king they had been told by the Jews. Were the Jews speaking by inspiration when they answered the Persians? There is no indication they were. Were the Persians inspired when they wrote the letter to the king? There is no reason to believe they were. The Jews could have been mistaken in their answer, or the Persians could have mistakenly recorded their answer. All we know from inspiration is that we have a true record of the letter that they sent the king. Inspiration tells us that the Persian governor wrote it, and inspiration tells us

that we have an accurate record of what the Persian governor wrote, but inspiration does not tell us that what the Persian governor wrote was true.

Verse 16 reads:

“Then came the same Sheshbazzar, and laid the foundation of the house of God which is in Jerusalem: and since that time even until now hath it been in building.”

Was that statement true? No, it was not.

Verse 16 says "and since that time even until now hath it been in building." But verse 24 of the previous chapter tells us that the worked had stopped, and we know from this chapter that the work did not resume until about 16 years later. Why then would the Jews have said this knowing it was not true? Most likely they just wanted to connect their current efforts with the efforts sanctioned by Cyrus, and, as we say in Texas, they had been fixin' to get back to it for quite some time now!

So, back to our original question, how could Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel both lay the foundation? Some surmise that one started, while the other finished. Others suggest that one laid a foundation, but it had to be re-laid when the worked was begun again later.

Others note that Sheshbazzar is credited in this Persian context (where crediting a Persian would have been helpful to the Jews' cause), while Zerubbabel is credited in the earlier Jewish context. This suggests the possibility that Sheshbazzar was a Persian leader, perhaps a Babylonian governor that Cyrus left in charge. (Ezra 1:8 does refer to Sheshbazzar as the "prince of Judah," which many take to mean that he was Jewish, and possibly from the royal line, but others argue that the word "prince" in that verse could have been used as a synonym for "governor.")

Verse 17 requests that a search be made for this decree. Apparently the Jews did not possess a copy or they would have just shown it to the governor. (Another lesson for us, perhaps? Always keep good written records!)

Again, we should note the courteousness of the Jews' response to the Persian officials. That courteousness likely played a role in the tone of the letter that went to Darius.

The Bible is clear on how we should treat those in authority – and we should treat them with respect. (Romans 13:1-2, 1 Peter 2:13-14, 17, Titus 3:1, 1 Timothy 2:1-4) True, we should obey God rather than man (Acts 5:29), but we are obeying God when we treat our elected officials with respect because that is how God has told us to treat them. Any attack on authority is an attack on God's authority. And that applies to all leaders. How do we know that?

1 Peter 2:17 – Honor the emperor.

That command was written when Nero was the emperor!

Ezra 6:1

Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon.

King Darius takes notice of the letter and does what the letter suggested that he do. Darius orders a search for the decree.

No doubt the rebellions early in his reign made him particularly sensitive to issues such as this. Archaeologists have found rooms that were used to store documents and that were linked to royal treasuries.

Ezra 6:2

2 And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written:

Verse 2 includes two details that are very interesting historically. First, the decree was found on a scroll, and second, the decree was located not in Babylon but in Achmetha.

The city called Achmetha in verse 2 by the KJV was called Ecbatana or Agbatana by the Greeks. The ESV uses Ecbatana.

Because thousands of clay tablets from this time have been found, we generally assume that all writing was done on such tablets. But sources other than the Bible speak of the “royal parchments” on which the Persians kept records.

As for Ecbatana, it was the location of the king’s summer palace because of its high elevation and comfortable climate. Cyrus lived in Babylon during the winter, in Susa during the spring, and in Ecbatana during the summer. We know from extra-Biblical sources that Cyrus spent the summer of 538 BC there, which is when this decree was written.

Ecbatana was located in the Zagros mountains of northwest Iran between Tehran and Baghdad, and tradition alleges that the tombs of Esther and Mordecai lie in the middle of the city.

That the decree was found in Ecbatana is a clue about how long this process likely took. Why? Because it is very doubtful that Ecbatana was the first place they looked!

LESSON 14

Last week we started Chapter 6, which is the last chapter in the first half of Ezra. For those who have been waiting patiently for Ezra to show up in his own book, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that he shows up in the first verse of Chapter 7. But the bad news is that Esther shows up first – and our plan is to study Esther before we get back to Ezra 7.

In Chapter 5, the local Persian bureaucrats showed up and starting taking names and asking questions. The Jews explained what they were doing, why they were doing, and the reason they believed they had permission from Cyrus to do it. And the Persian officials put it all down in a letter back to King Darius.

Chapter 5 ended with a request that the king search for the decree of Cyrus that the Jews said had given them permission to rebuild their temple.

In Ezra 6:1-2 from last week, that search is made, and the decree is found in Cyrus' summer palace in Ecbatana. Verses 3-5 give us the text of the decree.

Ezra 6:3-5

3 In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; 4 With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: 5 And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.

This decree was a vital part of the God's plan. How do we know that?

One reason is that this decree had been planned for a long time! Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1 both refer to Cyrus by name long before Cyrus was born. That tells us that Cyrus was important to God's plan.

Isaiah 44:28 – Who says of Cyrus, ‘He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose’; saying of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be built,’ and of the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid.’”

But another reason we know this decree is important is that it appears three times in the Bible. We just read it here in verses 3-5, but we also read it back in Ezra 1. And if you turn back on page from Ezra 1 you will find the decree again in the closing verses of 2nd Chronicles.

And finally, we know the decree is important because we have read the decree! And we know of the prophecies and the promises of God that needed the faithful people of God to be worshiping in their rebuilt temple when the Messiah came into the world 500 years later.

Verses 3-5 provide a record of Cyrus’ decree, and the first thing we notice is that it is different from the decree we saw in Chapter 1. How do we explain that?

This version of the decree appears to have been a memorandum to the royal treasurer regarding the expenses for the rebuilding of the temple. The version of the decree in Ezra 1 was a public announcement. These two records of the decree are not two variants of the same record of the decree but are instead two independent records of the decree. The version in Ezra 1 was for heralds to announce and posters to confirm, while the version here in Ezra 6 was the official detailed reference.

Verse 3 says “its height shall be sixty cubits and its breadth sixty cubits.” If the intent of the "breadth" in verse 3 is to say that the temple would be 60 cubits square, then some point out that such a temple could not have been built in the place of the original temple because the original temple was sixty cubits by 20 cubits (1 Kings 6:2). What is the explanation for that?

First (and once again), inspiration tells us that this is what Cyrus wrote to his treasurer; it does not vouch for the veracity of what Cyrus wrote. Second (and also once again), Hebrew and Aramaic numbers were difficult to copy, and thus we may have simply had a scribal error here.

It is remarkable that Cyrus' decree in verse 5 regarding the gold and silver vessels agrees so well with what the Jews told the Persian official in Ezra 5:14-15. As one commentator noted, it certainly lends credence to the integrity of their report. Jeremiah had prophesied that these items would be carried off to Babylon and later returned. (Jeremiah 27:21-22) We discussed earlier how important that return was to the Jews.

One point on which this version of the decree is much more explicit than the public version is on the important issue of who was to pay for the restoration. Verse 4 says to "let the expenses be given out of the king's house." The public version in Ezra 1 does not include that explicit statement, but it is likely implied by 1:2 – "he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem." In any event, there is no doubt here about who was to pay for the rebuilding.

Ezra 6:6-7

6 Now therefore, Tatnai, governor beyond the river, Shetharboznai, and your companions the Apharsachites, which are beyond the river, be ye far from thence: 7 Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God in his place.

After recording the decree by Cyrus, verse 6 picks up again with the message from Darius to the Persian officials, and that message in verse 6 is for them to "be ye far from thence!" Keep away! That phrase is actually a technical legal term that means that their accusations had been rejected. The Jews had won their case! "Let the work of this house of God alone!" How wonderful that command must have sounded to the Jews!

We would suppose that the governor in verse 7 is Zerubbabel, although he is not mentioned by name. In fact, after 5:2, Zerubbabel is never mentioned again in the book of Ezra, which may be good news to those tired of hearing about the Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel conundrum!

Ezra 6:8-10

8 Moreover I make a decree what ye shall do to the elders of these Jews for the building of this house of God: that of the king's goods, even of the

tribute beyond the river, forthwith expenses be given unto these men, that they be not hindered. 9 And that which they have need of, both young bullocks, and rams, and lambs, for the burnt offerings of the God of heaven, wheat, salt, wine, and oil, according to the appointment of the priests which are at Jerusalem, let it be given them day by day without fail: 10 That they may offer sacrifices of sweet savours unto the God of heaven, and pray for the life of the king, and of his sons.

The Jews were likely very anxious about what Darius would say, but their fears turned out to be unfounded. They had likely imagined the worst, but God gave them the best. It reminds me of one of my favorite Mark Twain quotes, “I’ve lived through many terrible things in my life, some of which actually happened.”

In fact, what could have been bad news, turned out to be tremendously good news. Those Persian officials (prodded along by the Jews’ troublesome neighbors) had indirectly done the Jews a huge favor – they once again had funding for their project from the king! As the poet William Cowper wrote, “The clouds ye so much dread are big with mercy” – and that was certainly the case here.

Some are surprised by Darius’ concern for the details of the Jewish worship in verses 9-10. As before, the most likely explanation is that Darius had some help from a Jewish scribe in writing this letter. Many, and in fact most, of the Jews were still living in Babylon. Had Daniel died by this time? Perhaps likely, but not necessarily. It is possible that Daniel was working behind the scenes as an adviser to King Darius. (But this king was **not** the same Darius who threw Daniel into the lion’s den.)

Verse 10 shows us that Darius took these religious matters seriously. He wanted the Jews to pray for his life and the lives of his sons. We see a similar request in the famous Cyrus Cylinder – “May all the gods whom I have resettled in their sacred cities ask daily Bel and Nebo for a long life for me and may they recommend me to him.”

Ezra 6:11-12

11 Also I have made a decree, that whosoever shall alter this word, let timber be pulled down from his house, and being set up, let him be hanged thereon; and let his house be made a dunghill for this. 12 And the God that hath caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people, that shall put to their hand to alter and to destroy this house of God which is at Jerusalem. I Darius have made a decree; let it be done with speed.

In verse 11 we find the penalty for anyone who would alter the king's edict, and it is quite severe: "a beam shall be pulled out of his house, and he shall be hanged or impaled on it, and his house shall be made a dunghill."

Once again, a Jewish scribe may have had a hand in crafting this penalty! But we know that it was common for ancient covenants to include curses against those who broke them, and many ancient decrees include punishments for those who disobeyed. Here the justice is a bit poetic – anyone who harms God's house will have his own house destroyed.

The word "hanged" in verse 11 is better translated impaled. Impalement on a sharpened pole was an excruciatingly painful and deadly form of punishment. It was practiced earlier by the Assyrians as portrayed in the reliefs depicting their conquest of Lachish in the time of King Hezekiah. These were recovered from Sennacherib's palace in Nineveh by Austen Henry Layard in the mid-1800s. This method of punishment was apparently taken over by the Persians. It was certainly no idle threat. History tells us that Darius once had 3,000 Babylonians impaled to crush a rebellion.

Verse 12 contains an additional curse. The phrase "the God who has caused his name to dwell there destroy all kings and people" recalls Deuteronomy 12:5 and is the strongest indication that a Jewish scribe helped Darius prepare this letter. And Darius was almost speaking as a prophet here because we know from Daniel 2 that God would indeed overthrow kings and peoples as part of his plan to usher in his eternal kingdom.

So far we have read the letter to Darius and the letter back, which included a decree by King Darius. Next we will see the reaction to that letter.

Ezra 6:13-15

13 Then Tatnai, governor on this side the river, Shetharboznai, and their companions, according to that which Darius the king had sent, so they did speedily. 14 And the elders of the Jews builded, and they prospered through the prophesying of Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo. And they builded, and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the commandment of Cyrus, and Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia. 15 And this house was finished on the third day of the month Adar, which was in the sixth year of the reign of Darius the king.

In these verses we are reaching the grand conclusion of the first half of Ezra – the rebuilding of the temple. God’s providence has been seen throughout, but no more so than here at the end where Darius the Great is seen moving to help God’s people as God pulls Darius’ strings.

As one commentator noted, this victory of God’s people clearly displays the providence of God at work through these pagan potentates. I’m sure that Darius the Great thought he was completely worthy of that title "Great," but he was just a tool in the hand of God.

God used foreign kings and foreign peoples to accomplish his plan. God raised up prophets from among his own people to accomplish his plan. God used his own people to accomplish his plan. God opened doors using the enemies of his people (such as those who reported the building efforts to the local Persian officials), and God opened doors using royal decrees.

We, too, are a part of God’s plan; we, too, have a role to play in that great plan; and we, too, are presented with great open doors. These people rushed through that door. Do we?

Are we on the look out for ways in which God is using those outside of his church to help us in our mission? As new technologies are created, are we thinking of ways to use them to spread the gospel? As economies collapse and industries falter, are we looking for hurting people who may now be more receptive to the gospel? God opens doors – and when he does, God expects his people to go through those doors while they remain open.

Verse 14 says that the people “finished their building by decree of the God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes king of Persia.” The most powerful word on earth at that time was the decree of a Persian king, but that king was being directed by an infinitely more powerful decree.

The inclusion of King Artaxerxes in verse 14 requires an explanation because he didn’t become king until much later than these events in 520 BC. Instead, Artaxerxes was the king when Ezra and Nehemiah returned in 458 and 445 BC. Why is Artaxerxes included here along with Cyrus and Darius?

The most likely answer is one that we have seen before – the author (Ezra) jumped out of the chronology for a moment to make a point.

Remember, this book was written after the walls had been built under Artaxerxes, and the author was looking back through history to the times of Cyrus and Darius. Just as he included the (then future) opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes in Chapter 4, here in Chapter 6 he included the (then future) support for the Jews that also occurred during the reign of Artaxerxes (although, as we will see, that support involved rebuilding the **walls** rather than rebuilding the temple).

Ezra is using all three kings involved in the restoration as illustrations of how even mighty kings are tools to accomplish the command of the God.

Verse 14 makes it clear that the building (not just of the temple but also of the city and the walls) would continue with divine direction and Persian support through the time of Artaxerxes. One commentator describes verse 14 as the key verse in the book of Ezra.

And finally in verse 15 the temple was completed! Haggai and Zechariah began preaching in 520 BC, and the temple was completed about five years later on March 12, 515 BC (converting to our own calendar). This great event occurred 72 years after the destruction of the first temple in 587.

Solomon’s temple had stood for 400 years. This second temple stood for over 500 years until it was largely replaced by Herod’s temple in 19 BC. Herod’s

temple and whatever remained in it from this second temple were destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Ezra 6:16-18

16 And the children of Israel, the priests, and the Levites, and the rest of the children of the captivity, kept the dedication of this house of God with joy, 17 And offered at the dedication of this house of God an hundred bullocks, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs; and for a sin offering for all Israel, twelve he goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. 18 And they set the priests in their divisions, and the Levites in their courses, for the service of God, which is at Jerusalem; as it is written in the book of Moses.

Now comes the celebration! The term translated “dedication” in verses 16-17 is Hanukkah, the name of the Jewish holiday that celebrates a similar dedication of this same temple after its defilement by the Antiochus Epiphanes in 165 BC. Unlike that event in 165 BC, we have no indication that this dedication became an annual celebration.

We can also compare this dedication with that of the first temple under Solomon in 1 Kings 8. There the number of sacrificed animals was much greater: 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats.

In verse 17, the people offered 12 male goats as a sin offering “for all Israel.” Again, we see the theme of continuity. Even though most of the former exiles were from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, all of the tribes were represented by this sacrifice. They were collectively the people of God, and they were collectively the heirs of his covenants.

In verse 18, the organization of the priests and the Levites was reinstated as it was practiced before the exile. And how did they know how to do that? Verse 18 tells us how: They did “as it is written in the Book of Moses.” Restoration must begin with a return to the word of God.

But that book was so dated! It was so old! These people were much more sophisticated now! They had much better ideas about how to do things! Surely God was looking for a modern approach to go along with their new modern

temple – right? Wrong! They turned back to the unchanging word of God to discover what God wanted them to do, and people today must do the same thing if they want to be pleasing to God.

The Aramaic section of Ezra that began in 4:8 ends in verse 18. From verse 19 onward the text is once again in Hebrew. We earlier discussed some possible reasons for the switch to Aramaic.

Ezra 6:19-22

19 And the children of the captivity kept the passover upon the fourteenth day of the first month. 20 For the priests and the Levites were purified together, all of them were pure, and killed the passover for all the children of the captivity, and for their brethren the priests, and for themselves. 21 And the children of Israel, which were come again out of captivity, and all such as had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel, did eat, 22 And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

The fourteenth day of the first month was the day stipulated in Exodus 12:6 for celebrating the Passover. In 515 BC it would have been on April 21 according to our calendar.

Although Passover's were celebrated yearly, they were typically only recorded when they were celebrated in relation to some important event, and most often when associated with revival movements, such as under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30, under Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35, and here in Ezra 6.

The Passover, as we know, commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt and also prefigured our redemption by Christ's death ("For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us." 1 Corinthians 5:7) So, as we saw that Zechariah was proclaiming Christ to the people, this feast was also pointing forward to the perfect sacrifice that was to come.

The purification of the priests in verse 20 would have involved a ritual washing with water as described in Exodus 29:4 and Numbers 8:7. Hezekiah's great

Passover celebration had to be delayed because there were not enough ceremonially pure priests. (2 Chronicles 30:3)

Verse 21 confirms that this group included some Jews who had remained behind when the others were taken away into exile. Apparently, many of them had assimilated themselves with the non-Jewish people who lived there, and some of them had been encouraged by these returning exiles and by the prophets to return to the religious requirements of the Law of Moses.

These non-exiled Jews were welcome to join the exiles, but only if they “had separated themselves unto them from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel.” They were not allowed to have one foot in Canaan and one foot in Jerusalem; they had to decide whose side they were on. Some of them chose God’s side.

Verse 21 is important because it corrects the false impression that the returning exiles were some sort of a bitterly exclusive group that wanted nothing to do with their neighbors. For those who wanted to join in on God’s terms as opposed to their own terms, what they found was an open door.

Jeremiah 29:13 – And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

The Feast of the Unleavened Bread in verse 22 was a separate feast that started the day after the Passover and lasted for seven days, but it was so closely associated with the Passover that the two were often treated as one feast.

The theme of verse 21 is joy. Throughout the Bible, joy is the characteristic of those who trust in God. In the Old Testament, thirteen different Hebrew roots (27 different words) are used to express joy in worshiping God, which tells us how important that concept was to the Jewish people. As Nehemiah would tell them later in Nehemiah 8:10, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The deeper we go in our study of God’s word and our desire to know God and please God, the more joyous we become. If we lack joy, it is an indication that

we are living on the surface – that we have just enough religion to make us miserable! That is a very sad place to live, which explains the misery!

LESSON 15 Part 1

A Final Comment on Ezra 6

Ezra 6:22 – And kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of **Assyria** unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

We end Chapter 6 with another puzzle – why does the author refer to Darius the Great, the king of Persia, as the “king of **Assyria**” in verse 22? Did Ezra make a mistake?

This puzzle is an easy one to solve when we remember that a major theme in this book is continuity. The trouble began with the Assyrians, and that empire had continued all the way to the present day of Ezra 6, albeit through the Babylonians and then through the Persians. Even Herodotus recognized this continuity when he referred to Babylon as the capital of Assyria. The Gentile oppression had begun under the Assyrians, as Nehemiah also recognized:

Nehemiah 9:32 – Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the terrible God, who keepeth covenant and mercy, let not all the trouble seem little before thee, that hath come upon us, on our kings, on our princes, and on our priests, and on our prophets, and on our fathers, and on all thy people, **since the time of the kings of Assyria unto this day.**

Although the Gentile domination was not over, God had given his people a brief period of favor in the eyes of the foreign kings.

One commentator says that the reference in verse 22 to Darius as the king of **Assyria** is “perhaps the most significant statement about Persia in the book.”

So where are we at the end of Ezra 6? The first return under the decree of Cyrus has occurred and the goal of that return has been accomplished with the dedication of the second temple. Ezra 6 ends with a joyous celebration over the victory of God’s people.

What happens next? Ezra 7 will begin almost 60 years after the events in Ezra 6, with the second return under Ezra in 458. But we are not going to study the second half of Ezra until after we look at what happened between those two chapters, and we read about those events in the book of Esther, which is centered on the royal city of Susa. Other than a brief note about Xerxes in 4:6, Ezra tells us nothing about this interim period.

LESSON 15 Part 2

Esther is a Strange Book

I enjoy teaching strange books! Revelation, Daniel, Zechariah – about the only thing most people agree about for those books is that they are strange. But as strange as those books are, Esther may win the prize as the strangest book in the Bible.

Most commentaries on Esther begin with the question, “what kind of book is Esther?” And there are about as many answers to that question as there are commentaries.

Is it history? Is it fiction? Is it historical fiction? Is it fictionalized history? Is it comedy? Is it a Persian chronicle? Is it a Greek romance? Is it a carnival tale? Is it a wisdom tale? Is it burlesque? Each of those answers is proposed by commentaries.

About all the commentators can agree upon is that Esther is strange. Why?

- Although the heathen king of Persia is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses (29 times by name), God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. There is not even a divine title or pronoun referring to God in the book. And this was certainly intentional.
- There is likewise no mention of God’s commands or of God’s relationship with his people. There is no mention of Satan or angels. There is no mention of the covenant. Unlike the book of Daniel, no one prays in the book of Esther, and no one has a vision in the book of Esther. There are no explicit miracles in the book of Esther.
- Other than the fact that the book is about the Jewish people, there is nothing Jewish about the book of Esther in the religious sense. There is no apparent concern for the law in Esther. (Haman does say in 3:8 that “their laws are diverse from all people.”) Although the book was written after the events in Ezra 1-6, there is no mention of Jerusalem or the temple. “If one went through the text and replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Jews’ with the name of some other ethnic

group, there would be no reason to think the story had anything at all to do with the Bible.” The lack of religious language in the book is highly unusual for books of that time and is certainly intentional. (But, as one commentator noted, God seems to lurk everywhere in the background of the book!)

- The book of Esther is never cited or alluded to in the New Testament.
- Neither Esther nor Mordecai is ever mentioned anywhere else in the Bible.
- Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman (the other being Ruth).
- Surprisingly, one of the central themes of Esther is **feasting**. The Hebrew word for “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of the Old Testament books put together. The Feast of Purim comes from Esther and is one of the two Jewish feasts not found in the Law of Moses (the other being Hanukkah.)
- Esther is the only book in the Old Testament that was not found among the Dead Sea scrolls. (That omission is probably because the Essenes did not celebrate the Feast of Purim.)
- Esther is the only Old Testament book describing events that take place entirely in Persia. In fact, every scene in Esther (except for two brief episodes in Haman’s home and the brief account of the Jewish victory in Chapter 9) takes place in the royal court of Persia, with some events in the throne room and in the king’s private quarters.
- In the rest of the Old Testament, Jews are introduced by giving the name of their father or the name of their tribe, while foreigners are introduced by giving the name of their country or ethnicity (Uriah the Hittite, Ruth the Moabitess). But in Esther, Mordecai is called “Mordecai the Jew” six times (the only six times the phrase “the Jew” occurs in our English Old Testament).
- The characters in Esther are presented very differently from one another. With Haman, for example, we are told his motives, his drives, and his ambitions. Haman is allowed no mysteries. But with Mordecai and Esther, we see only their words and their actions – we are largely left to wonder as to their motives. We aren’t told what they are thinking. For example, (although we might be able to guess) we are

never told why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman or show him any reverence – the event that leads to all the trouble that follows.

- On one level Esther is a simple story, yet it has an incredibly detailed structure in which thesis after thesis is met by antithesis after antithesis. (See the handout.)
- There is very little direct speech in the book. In the book of Ruth, the plot is advanced primarily through dialogue, but the opposite is true in Esther, where the plot is advanced primarily through narration. Mordecai, for example, is mentioned by name 56 times in Esther, yet he has only one short (but memorable!) speech (4:13-14).
- The first chapter of Esther has not a word to say about God or God's people, but rather is focused on pagan characters involved in a pagan event from the pagan world.

In addition to being a strange book, the book of Esther is an incredibly meaningful book, particularly to those facing persecution.

We will see how it is meaningful to Christians, but it has always been a very meaningful book to Jews as well, particularly when they have been faced with those seeking to destroy them, as Haman did in Esther's day and as Hitler did in ours. The Nazis forbade the reading of Esther in the concentration camps, but Jewish prisoners wrote the book from memory and read it in secret.

What Kind of Book is Esther?

That is a strange question to ask about a book of the Bible. After all, no one ever asks what kind of book is Exodus or what kind of book is Ezra? But all commentaries on Esther begin with this same question, and many different answers are proposed. What kind of book is Esther?

Some argue that Esther is a historical narrative. That is, Esther contains an accurate account of a series of events that took place at the stated time and place. (Not wanting to keep anyone in suspense, this is where we are going to end up – but first we will look at some of the other answers that have been given.)

Esther certainly presents itself as history. Why does anyone argue otherwise? Because Esther has been weighed in most historians' balances and found wanting. Why? Here are some of the alleged problems gleefully recorded in any number of liberal commentaries:

- There are no extra-biblical sources that mention either queen in this book (Vashti or Esther) or either adviser in this book (Haman or Mordecai) during the reign of Xerxes.
 - The Greek histories of Persia tell us that Xerxes' queen at this time was Amestris, who was not a Jew.
 - Herodotus tells us about a Persian restriction of royal marriages to members of seven aristocratic families of which Esther was not a part.
 - Esther 1:1 begins with a reference to 127 satrapies in the Persian empire; Herodotus mentions only 20 satrapies.
 - One of the major complicating factors in Esther is the irrevocable nature of the laws of Persia. However, we are told that there is no extra-biblical evidence for this.
 - There is likewise, we are told, no confirmation of a law that uninvited guests approaching the king would be slain without the king raising his scepter.
 - It appears, at least on the surface, from Esther 2:6 that Mordecai was taken captive with Jehoiachin in 596 BC, but the events in Esther take place during the twelfth year of Xerxes, which was 122 years later.

One commentator reports that the "conclusions seem inevitable that the Book of Esther is not historical, and that it is doubtful whether even an historical kernel underlies its narrative."

We look at a list like that in a commentary, and our first thought is that those do indeed seem like problems. But as soon as we start investigating them, the problems quickly disappear.

And a lack of evidence? Hardly. Esther is evidence. Daniel is evidence. Ezra is evidence. In fact, those books are the best evidence we have as to the events of that time.

We will discuss those alleged problems as we work through the text, but first let's look at how others characterize the book of Esther.

Some argue that Esther is a historical novel. That is, the author is writing about a historical event, but he is doing so with a degree of poetic license. Something of historical importance is being told, but in a creative way.

Others argue that Esther is a fictional narrative. That is, Esther is just a very creative short story meant to entertain or teach (or both), but not meant to convey a history of actual events.

Some argue that Esther is a comedy (and no one disputes that some of the events in this very serious book are very funny). They point to Haman and the King as a megalomaniac and a buffoon, respectively. They point to the many amusing coincidences, parallels, and reverses in the book. They point to what they see as mockery, ironic exaggeration, and underdeveloped characters and caricatures in the book.

We can group these proposals into two categories:

- The first option is that Esther is not fictional at all, but rather is what it purports to be: a historical account of the Jews in Persia during the reign of Xerxes.
- The second option is that Esther is either partly fictional or entirely fictional.

The arguments in favor of the second option and against Esther's historicity are based primarily on three things:

- Contrary statements by Greek historians (mainly Herodotus).
- The absence of confirming evidence by the same Greek historians.
- Events judged to be highly improbable, at least based on our limited knowledge of the ancient world.

For starters, those who bet against the Bible have been proved wrong over and over again as additional archaeological evidence is found, and we will see examples of that in our study of this book.

For example, in Esther 3:7, Haman casts lots during the first month of the year to determine a date (in the 12th month) on which to execute his plans. Commentators once pointed to this event as an example of something highly improbable, but evidence has since been found that some rulers in the ancient world would cast lots in the first month to determine events and actions for the following twelve months – and suddenly the improbable became very probable!

As for the absence of confirming evidence, that is not very surprising when one considers the lack of sources about Persia during this time. There are a few inscriptions about King Xerxes' reign written during his reign, which means that they are very biased in his favor. The Greek historians also tell us about Xerxes, but their focus is primarily on Xerxes' interaction with the Greeks, and they are biased against him. There is little information from any source on the period between 479 and the end of Xerxes' reign in 465, and even less information (such as Esther) that presents an objective account.

As for the supposed contradictions between Esther and the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus, it never seems to occur to these liberal scholars that perhaps Herodotus is the one who is mistaken.

Also, while it is true that Herodotus does not mention Esther, Mordecai, or Vashti (at least not by that name), it is also true that Herodotus does not mention Belshazzar, whose existence was likewise denied by liberal scholars until archaeological discoveries confirmed his place in history and the left the liberal scholars with liberal egg on their liberal faces!

But when the liberals throw mud, we need to do more than just throw mud back in return. We need to investigate their charges.

So let's start with perhaps the biggest charge against the book – Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was Amestris. The book of Esther, by contrast, does not mention Amestris, but instead names two other queens: Vashti and Esther, neither of which was named by Herodotus. How is this explained?

First, this may be yet another example of historians automatically assuming Herodotus is correct and the Bible is mistaken. It never seems to occur to them that Herodotus might be wrong and the Bible might be correct.

Second, Persian kings generally had many royal wives, a fact confirmed about Xerxes by the book of Esther. Esther tells us that Xerxes had at least two queens, and that he had a harem from which he selected at least one of those two queens. And so Xerxes could have had three queens: Amestris, Vashti, and Esther (with Herodotus naming one of them and the book of Esther naming the other two).

But, if so, why? Why are two of those three queens not mentioned by Herodotus?

Perhaps Herodotus mentions only Amestris because he was interested only in the royal wives who bore the successors to the throne. All other royal wives and concubines, of which Persian kings typically had many, were presumably irrelevant to Herodotus' purpose of tracing the succession of the Persian dynasty.

Herodotus mentions only two of the several wives of Xerxes' father, Darius, both of whom bore sons who contended for the throne of Darius, which Xerxes eventually won. If Herodotus includes in his history only the royal wives who were directly relevant to the succession of the throne, then this historical problem in Esther disappears. Only Amestris would be expected to be named by Herodotus since she gave birth to Xerxes' successor, Artaxerxes.

A third possibility is that Amestris is in fact mentioned in Esther, just not by that name. That is, perhaps Amestris is either Esther or Vashti. But which one? To answer that question we need to know more about Amestris.

Who was Amestris? The Greeks describe her as strong-willed and brutal, once ordering 18 noble Persian youths to be buried alive as an offering to one of her false gods. Amestris gave Xerxes a robe she had personally woven, and Xerxes was tricked into giving that robe to his niece and daughter-in-law, with whom he was seeking to have an affair. In fact, Xerxes had also attempted to have an affair with her mother, his brother's wife, and he had married that woman's daughter to his son, hoping it would bring him closer to her mother – but when her daughter showed up, he turned his attention on her, forgetting about her mother. Once Amestris found out about the affair with the daughter, she had the girl's mother mutilated, believing she was behind all of the trouble.

What does that sordid account tell us? Several things, but one thing it tells us for sure is that Amestris was not Esther! But could Amestris have been Vashti?

We haven't made it to Chapter 1 yet, but I suspect many of us already know all about Queen Vashti. She was the queen in Esther 1 who was commanded to appear before King Xerxes while he was giving a drunken feast, but who refused to appear as commanded. She was then demoted, which led to Esther becoming queen.

Could the evil Amestris really be the same person as righteous Vashti? That's a trick question – what makes us think that Vashti was righteous?

Earlier we talked about the different ways that the people in Esther are described by the narrator. Haman, for example, is laid wide open for our inspection – we know what he is thinking and planning. Others, by contrast, are known to us only by their words and their actions – we are never told their motivations or their thoughts. Vashti falls in this latter category, and we don't know too many of her words or actions either! Here is the sum total of what the Bible tells us about Vashti:

- She was queen, and she gave a feast for the women while Xerxes was giving a feast for the men.

- Xerxes commanded seven eunuchs to escort her to his feast so that the men could see her great beauty.
- Vashti refused to come, and the king got very angry.
- Her punishment was that she was no longer allowed to come before the king. (She was not killed or divorced, but rather she was demoted.)

The key question is why did Vashti refuse to come before the King as she was commanded? The Bible does not answer that question.

Was Vashti righteous? Perhaps. Was Vashti evil? Perhaps. We just can't tell too much about her from her refusal to appear before the king and all of his drunken guests. Even the most evil woman alive would likely have thought twice before accepting an invitation to appear before a group of men who had been drinking for seven days straight!

When we get to Chapter 1 we will have more to say about Vashti's possible motivations, but for now all we need to know is that we cannot rule out Vashti and Amestris being the same person based just on the Biblical evidence about Vashti, and there is some extra-Biblical evidence suggesting they may indeed have been the same person.

And if they are the same person, then that identification would likely require us to change our typical view of Vashti as a positive example of righteousness and courage. But, again, when we get to Chapter 1 we will see that many readers of Esther, both Christian and Jewish, throughout the years have categorized Vashti as a very negative example because she disobeyed her husband.

Vashti was punished by no longer being allowed to come before the king. What does history tell us happened to Amestris?

Amestris is not mentioned by Herodotus during Xerxes' reign after the "mutilation" event we discussed earlier – apparently suffering the consequences of her own vindictiveness. She reappears later as a strong figure after Xerxes was assassinated, during the reign of her son, Artaxerxes I. As

queen mother, she pressured her son, the king, to behead 50 Greek prisoners and crucify another.

LESSON 16

If Vashti was Amestris, here is likely what happened (combining what we know from the Bible with what the Greeks tell us). The peace envisioned by Cyrus had been shattered in the last years of Darius' reign by revolts in Egypt and in Babylon. After quelling these revolts, Darius' son Xerxes held a banquet early in his reign, at which time Amestris/Vashti was deposed. The purpose of this banquet was to plan the invasion of Greece. The war (which explains the time lag between Esther 1 and 2) began well but ended with a major naval defeat at Salamis in 480. The king returned home, seeking comfort among members of his harem. This was the year of Esther's marriage to the king. If this is what happened then there would have been about four years or more between when Vashti was demoted and when Esther became queen, which would coincide with the four years Xerxes was absent from Persia on the expedition against the Greeks. And, of course, this would also mean that we would need to dispense with the notion that Vashti was "righteous Vashti."

If Vashti was Amestris, then suddenly Herodotus turns from a potential problem into a confirmation of the Biblical account. And perhaps our questions about her motivation and her punishment become easier to answer.

Why, for example, was Vashti demoted rather than killed for such an effrontery? (History tells us that Xerxes had a nasty and at times irrational temper, so we might have expected a much worse fate for this queen.) A careful review of the dates suggests that Amestris was most likely pregnant with the future king Artaxerxes at the time of this event. That fact might also tell us why the queen would have been particularly reluctant about being paraded in front of men at a drunken feast.

But if they are the same person, why two different names? There may have been three different names! The book of Esther may be giving us the Hebrew form of a Persian name, with Herodotus giving us the Greek form of the same Persian name. And neither the 'V' sound in Vashti nor the 'Sh' sound occurs in

Greek, which could explain how Vashti became Amestris in the Greek history. Also, Vashti means beautiful or best, and so it may have just been the king's nickname for Amestris. After having studied Daniel, we should not be surprised at all to find someone with two different names! Xerxes himself has a different name in the book of Esther, and such could have been true of Queen Vashti. Esther herself has two names in this book.

And why doesn't Herodotus mention Esther? We have already given a likely reason – Herodotus was interested only in those queens who bore sons in the royal line. Another likely reason is that Herodotus' history ends shortly after Xerxes' campaign to the West, which comes at just about the time the events in Esther begin. And this would also mean that the book of Esther is just about the only source for what was happening in Persia at this time.

So what can we then conclude about the Amestris problem? It is not a problem at all. In fact, if Vashti and Amestris are the same person — and they fit together well with what the secular Greek histories tell us — then Herodotus moves from the problem category into the confirmation category. We will have much more to say about Vashti when we get to Chapter 1.

What about the other so-called historical problems we mentioned? They are likewise easy to explain.

The fact that Esther did not come from one of the seven select families of Herodotus proves nothing. Neither Xerxes' own mother nor Amestris came from one of those seven families.

The 127 satrapies of Esther 1:1 are apparently smaller units than those 20 satrapies under discussion by Herodotus. For example, Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 1:3; 7:6 discuss the province of Judah, which was a subcategory of a larger satrapy.

What about the irrevocable laws of the Persian kings? Historians tell us there is no evidence for such a thing – is that correct?

First, as we mentioned last week, Esther and Daniel are evidence for such a thing – in fact, those two books should be very compelling evidence to an honest historian.

For example, the book of Esther shows a very thorough knowledge of Persian names and the details of the Persian court and palace. The book agrees very well with what we know about King Xerxes from other sources – the greatness of his empire, his quick and sometimes irrational temper, his almost unlimited promises and generous gifts, his drunken feast, and even his efficient postal system (3:13 – “Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces”). The kingdom of Xerxes was known for extending from India to Cush as Esther tells us. The architecture of his palace in Esther matches the excavated palace of Artaxerxes II at Susa, a palace modeled after the one built by Darius and used by Xerxes.

Second, Herodotus does give us some evidence for this "irrevocable law" rule. We earlier discussed the event in Herodotus in which Xerxes gave Amestris’ robe to his niece and son’s wife. Herodotus tells us that Xerxes tried to get the robe back but he could not because he couldn’t go back on his word. Xerxes offered whole cities, gold, and even his army to get the cloak back, but to no avail. Then, at his own birthday party, Amestris held him to his word again, gaining the right to have his brother’s wife mutilated. Here is how Herodotus describes the event:

“He (Xerxes) accordingly offered her (his son’s wife) cities instead (of the robe Amestris had given him) and gold in abundance and an army for none but herself to command. Armies are the most suitable of gifts in Persia. But as he could not move her, he gave her the mantle; and she, rejoicing greatly in the gift, went flaunting her finery. Amestris heard that she had the mantle, but when she learned the truth, it was not the girl with whom she was angry. She supposed rather that the girl’s mother was guilty and that this was her doing, and so it was Masistes’ (the king’s brother) wife whom she plotted to destroy.”

“Xerxes considered it a terrible and wicked act to give up his brother’s wife, and that too when she was innocent of the deed; for he knew the purpose of the request. Nevertheless, since Amestris was insistent and the law compelled him (for at this royal banquet in Persia every request must of

necessity be granted), he unwillingly consented, and delivered the woman to Amestris.”

Did you notice that phrase near the end? “The law compelled him.” That is not lifted from the Bible – that is lifted from Herodotus – and it agrees with what we see in the Bible! Herodotus himself confirms the irrevocable nature of the Persian laws. Who else but the king could revoke his own law, and if the king was “compelled” by the law as Herodotus tells us, then doesn’t that tell us that not even the king could revoke his law?

What about the objection that there is no evidence outside the Bible for the notion that anyone who came before a Persian king without being summoned risked summary execution?

Archaeologists have uncovered an image of a Persian king (likely either Darius with the crown prince Xerxes standing behind him or Xerxes himself with the crown prince Artaxerxes standing behind him). The king in that image is sitting on his throne and holding a long scepter in his right hand. And who is standing just behind the king and the crown prince in that engraved image? A soldier holding a large ax. That image could be used as an illustration of the throne room scene in Esther – that is how perfectly it aligns with the text of Esther.

Finally, one of the main objections raised by some against Esther is that, they say, it contains events that are just too improbable to be true. Esther is in the right place at the right time when Vashti is deposed and when Haman’s evil plans come to light. When the king cannot sleep and asks for historical records to be read, the page happens to fall at the page highlighted Mordecai’s role in foiling a plot against the king. As the king considers what to do, Haman just happens to be standing outside. How do we answer those who argue such coincidences are too unlikely to be true?

First, as we have already said, such comments forget that although God is not mentioned in Esther, God is nevertheless present in Esther – and with God all things are possible. Esther and Joseph have much in common, and one such thing is that the life of each gives us a wonderful example of God’s providence. How does God work in our world today – an age in which miracles have ended?

The answer is that God works behind the scenes – and that is exactly how we see God working in the book of Esther. When we are blessed by unlikely or improbable events – we should thank God rather than thank our lucky stars!

As we move through the text, we will see that the book of Esther has much to say about coincidences and luck. Are the events in the book just lucky coincidences, or is a greater power involved? The answer seems clear in Esther – each of the incidents regarded by itself might well appear to be the result of chance, but when taken together the element of chance disappears. They all converge to one point, and their design is evident. If I flip a coin and get 4 heads in a row, you may think I am lucky. But if I flip that coin and get 40 heads in a row, you will no longer be thinking that luck has anything to do with it – you will suspect I have a two-headed coin and that I have intentionally designed things so that particular outcome would occur.

What is the answer regarding the lucky coincidences in our own lives? While it is true that time and chance happens to us all (Ecclesiastes 9:11), not everything that happens to us comes by chance. If God by his providence is actively working in this world, then we need to look for his hand and for his open doors. The pagan may believe that all we do and all we are is governed by chance, but the Christian knows better. Rome worshiped the god of fortune, but we know better. Esther can teach us to recognize God's providence in our own lives.

I am reminded of a story I once read in a book about prayer. The author told about how he was trying to get to sleep one night in advance of a sermon on prayer he was scheduled to deliver the next day, but he was being kept awake by a barking dog next door. He prayed for the barking to stop, and (to his surprise) it did so at once. He was then unable to sleep for wondering whether the dog had stopped barking on account of his prayer!

Getting back now to our responses to someone who complains that the events in Esther are too improbable to be true, second, it should go without saying that fact is very often much stranger than fiction. As the saying goes, you just can't make this up!

Third, those who complain that the events in Esther are too improbable to have occurred appear to know about as much about mathematics as they do about theology! There is a difference between you picking a winning lottery number ahead of the drawing and you hearing a news report on the winning number after the drawing – one has an almost zero chance of occurring, whereas the other happens every week. We are not looking in Esther at an event randomly plucked from history and that happens to be filled with coincidences; instead we are looking at an event chosen after the fact because it was so interesting that God put it into the Bible. Also, as we already noted, the events in Esther are not random – but rather are being directed by God working behind the scenes. (I have the same problem with those who takes the Messianic prophecies, assign probabilities to them, and then argue that Jesus must be the Messiah because it is so unlikely anyone would have satisfied all of the prophecies just by chance. That is bad theology and bad math!)

And one final note on this point – those modern scholars who believe the events in Esther are so unlikely most likely believe that they themselves evolved through random mutations from single cell creatures that somehow sprang into existence from lifeless matter due to nothing but random chance after a giant explosion. When viewed alongside that fairy tale, Esther looks like the Wall Street Journal!

Honest historians and commentators concede many historical accuracies in Esther, and for that reason few today would argue that Esther is a complete fiction. Instead, most modern scholars view it as a historical novel.

We, of course, will take the position that Esther is not any sort of a novel, but instead is a historical narrative describing actual events and actual people – and we will do so for at least five reasons:

1. There is no indication that the book of Esther is intended to be taken in any way other than as a straightforward narrative of events as they occurred. The book goes to great lengths to include places, names, events, and many

historical details. If this book is not a history, then how can we distinguish it from the other historical books in the Bible?

2. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that Esther is an accurate witness to Persian affairs and Persian culture.

3. Although we have no record of Jesus ever mentioning Esther, Jesus' view of the Old Testament is that it is an unquestionably reliable guide to past events. Jesus mentions Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, David, and many other persons and incidents from the Old Testament. "It is not too much to say that Jesus accepted without reservation the entire historical fabric of the Old Testament, including those aspects of it most troublesome to modern minds." The Creation? The Flood? Jonah and the fish? Jesus believed in them all, and he knows because he was there!

4. The Bible is the inspired word of God. Although there are within it some fictional accounts that are intended to teach a lesson (parables, for example), they are always clearly indicated as such ("Then he began to speak to them in parables"). Esther has no such indication, and so we must take it for what it claims to be – a true history of actual events. The first words in the book are "Now it came to pass," not "Once upon a time." The book ends in 10:2 with "And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?" Esther presents itself as history because that is exactly what it is – history.

5. The message of Esther is tied to its historical nature. The basis for the celebration of Purim is the historical event in which the Jews were delivered from their enemies. If Esther does not report this historical incident accurately, then Purim is based on fiction. Also, a major theme of Esther is that of reversal in which God works on behalf of his people to turn evil into good. What does it say about that theme if the events on which it is based are mere fiction? What sort of confidence or comfort would that provide? "God is working on your behalf, and if you don't believe me, let me tell you a fairy tale!" That

makes no sense at all! If Esther is not history, then the message of Esther is meaningless!

What is the Historical Setting of Esther?

We discussed the history of Persia in our introductory lessons on Ezra, and we won't repeat that here. But we will consider the history of Xerxes, the Persian king at the center of these events.

The events in Esther take place during the reign of Xerxes, who in Hebrew is called Ahasuerus. Xerxes was king of Persia from 486 until 465 BC. He was preceded by Darius the Great (who was king when the second temple was completed in Ezra 6) and was followed by Artaxerxes (who was king when Ezra returned in Ezra 7) and also when Nehemiah returned.

Our primary source of evidence from this era and outside the Bible comes from Herodotus, the Greek historian, whose book *Histories of the Persian Wars* (490-480 BC) tells us about the Persian kings and their campaigns.

Although Herodotus was a Greek writing about his Persian enemies and therefore not an objective source, his book does provide some evidence about Persian personalities and practices. For example, he describes Xerxes as tall and handsome, as an ambitious ruler, and as a warrior. It appears that Herodotus was fascinated by Xerxes because about a third of his book is taken up with his reign.

Herodotus describes Xerxes' Greek expedition in 480-479, which ended as a dismal failure. But Xerxes also had some victories. He reconquered Egypt, which had rebelled under Darius, and he also suppressed a rebellion in Babylon. There is little doubt that Xerxes was able to amass the largest army and navy ever mustered in antiquity.

Xerxes' greatest achievement may have been his completion of the palace complex that Darius began in Persepolis. It has been called a marvel of

grandeur, beauty, and luxury. A foundation stone has been found that begins, "I am Xerxes, the great king."

But Xerxes had a problem (according to Herodotus and according to Esther): he did not measure up to the moral quality of his predecessors (who weren't that high on the moral quality scale to begin with!).

One historian notes that Xerxes inherited none of the good qualities of the previous kings, but only a love of opulent display that progressively sapped his moral fiber. Another wrote that Xerxes "had the weakness, tyrannical character, and love of luxury to be expected in a prince reared at court."

In 470, the Persian army again suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks, which ended their 50-year struggle with Greece. Persia maintained control over Egypt and Cyprus, but lost control over the Greek colonies of Asia Minor. Xerxes was killed in a conspiracy in 465 and was succeeded by his son Artaxerxes I, who is the king who later allowed Ezra and Nehemiah to return.

LESSON 17

What are the key themes of Esther?

Reversal

As shown on the handout, Esther has a remarkable structure that is built around the key event in Chapter 6 in which the tables are turned between Haman and Mordecai. For each thesis leading up to that event, there is an antithesis following that event.

Each of these thesis/antithesis pairs reinforces a central theme of Esther, which is the theme of reversal. That theme is seen most clearly in Esther 9:1, which has been called the guiding principle of the book:

“Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king’s command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, **the reverse occurred**: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.”

That verse is a summary statement of the entire book, and it emphasizes that events had taken an unexpected and complete turnaround.

In a book that does not refer to God, this theme of reversal has the providence of God at its center. The reversals occur because the actions of powerful people are overturned by power from a different source. The tables get turned repeatedly in Esther, and God is the great over-turner of tables. God turns darkness into light. God turns mourning into rejoicing. God turns defeat into salvation. God turns death into life.

Is it an overstatement to say that this theme of reversal that we see so clearly in Esther is perhaps the theme of the entire Bible? (And, if so, what does that tell us about the importance of this oft-neglected little book?) Who overturned more tables than Jesus?

“Kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.”
(Isaiah 52:15)

Feasting

A second theme that we find in Esther is the theme of feasting. The word translated “feast” or “banquet” occurs nearly as many times in Esther as it does in the rest of Old Testament.

The events in Esther open and close with feasting, and others feasts occur throughout. One of the central events in the book is the establishment of the feast of Purim (or “lots”), which is still celebrated by Jews today.

Why the emphasis on feasting?

Perhaps the best explanation is that the interplay between feasting and reversal reflects the interplay between God’s providence and human behavior.

Esther herself, for example, is propelled forward by the interplay of human behavior and God’s providence. She begins as a pawn, and we see things happening to her rather than through her. But by the end, she is in control and acting with full authority (9:29).

Why? Because at a decisive moment she decided to act, crossing that boundary between human behavior and God’s providence. (4:15) That decision led to the reversals in the book, and God’s providence worked through her decision. If she had made another decision, God’s providence no doubt would have looked elsewhere, but she made that decision, and we can see the outcome.

As we study Esther and see the providence of God in action, we are reminded of the events in the life of Joseph. As with Esther, the events in the life of Joseph are often viewed by some as too improbable to be true, but as with Esther, the answer to that objection is the providence of God.

In one way, this ancient tale of intrigue from the Persian court is the most modern book in the Old Testament. Why?

Because in this book, God deals with his people as he deals with us today. Like the Jews of Persia, we have no earthly king, no earthly prophet, and no earthly kingdom. Like them, we live without miracles. Instead, what we see is God working behind the scenes through his people and through others to providentially provide for his people as they live in a hostile and pagan environment. What we see in Esther is how God's providence works through human action, and we also see how our inaction can hinder the providence of God.

Is God Hidden in Esther?

Let's return now to the big question we started with - why is God never mentioned in the book of Esther?

I think we can say that God is not hidden in Esther, but rather perhaps God is veiled.

“Visions and revelations may come and go, but the veiled presence of God is a constant that may not be seen or felt but will always sustain his people in good, bad, and ugly times. This is the precious truth that the book of Esther shows us.”

The events in Esther encourage the reader to look behind that veil to understand what is really going on behind the scenes, and the key way that the book of Esther does that is by not mentioning God at all. What better way to illustrate the veiled nature of God? What better way to illustrate God's unseen role in history? What better way to encourage faithfulness even when it appears that God is hidden?

And is God really veiled in Esther? Those who look for God will find him – even in Esther. In Esther 4:3, what did the Jews do in response to the edict from Haman? They fasted. What purpose could that fasting have had other than an appeal to God? The veil is pretty thin in that verse!

And don't we see an allusion to God in the statement Mordecai makes in Esther 4:14?:

“For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from **another place**; but thou and thy father's house **shall be destroyed**: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom **for such a time as this?**”

“Another place?” Isn't that a subtle reference to God? At the very least, there is a strong sense of confidence that deliverance will come. And why should Mordecai add to this a threat to Esther and her family unless he is thinking of the ancient consequences of disobedience to God's law? Finally, the phrase “for such a time as this” shows us that Mordecai saw a design in these events. How can we have design without a designer?

Perhaps the most intriguing evidence for the hidden God in Esther is found in the links to other biblical events that do mention God.

- God blessed Joseph and gave him favor with Potiphar in Genesis 39:3-4. God gave the Israelites favor with the Egyptians in Exodus 12:36. Esther simply “gained favor” in Esther 2:15.
 - The Israelites cried out to God in Exodus 2:23. The Jews in Esther simply cry out in Esther 4:3.
 - God promised personally to put fear of the Jews among their enemies in the promised land in Deuteronomy 2:25. In Esther, the enemies of the Jews simply fear them Esther 8:17.

These links are inviting the careful reader to see God on every page of Esther!

The book of Esther reveals that there are two dimensions of reality – one that is seen and one that is unseen. Esther is herself a person with two identities; she has two names, one of which means “hidden.” The root for the Hebrew word “Esther” is “saiter,” which means “concealment.”

On the surface, to be a faithful Jew would require return to Jerusalem, observance of temple worship, and a legitimate Jewish pedigree. But being a faithful Jew meant more than that. It meant showing the presence of God in

this world. And today, we in the church are likewise called to show the presence of God in this world. Perhaps we look in vain to find God's name in Esther because his identity is joined to that of his people. We can see God when we see God's faithful people.

Another place to look for God in Esther is by looking at the narrator of the book. The narrator in Esther is omniscient, privy not only to conversations in highly restricted areas of the Persian palace but also to people's private thoughts and feelings. Who would know these things but God, and the Holy Spirit who authored the text?

The providence of God is on display in Esther, which means that God is on display in Esther for all to see. The providence of God also explains the book's humor. Despite the seriousness of the events, there is a sense of lightness in the book. There is optimism from the outset that the Jewish people will survive. Esther is an optimistic book, and it calls his people (both then and now) to be an optimistic people. How can we explain the humor in this book apart from confidence in God?

Another way to look at Esther is to see it as a conflict between competing worldviews. One worldview is represented by Haman, who believed in fate and tried to use that fate to destroy his enemies. ("Purim" means lots.) This belief in fate pervaded the ancient world except for Israel, and it formed the basis for the astrology, omens, and magical practices that are so strongly condemned in the Old Testament. Many aspects of these ancient pagan practices are being revived today and called "New Age" beliefs. They are anything but new!

By contrast, the Biblical worldview knows nothing of fatalism. God is the Lord of history, although he has made men responsible for their decisions and actions. God is in control, and history moves toward the goal that God has marked. Esther can be seen as a conflict between this Biblical worldview and Haman's fatalism.

When was Esther written?

There are no prophecies in the book that would preclude the book from having been written after a certain date. All we can say with absolute certainty is that it was written between around 465 BC (the end of Xerxes' reign) and around AD 70 (when Josephus included the events of Esther in his *Antiquities* book). There is some evidence that Esther was translated into Greek by Lysimachus, which could move the endpoint of that range to 76 BC or possibly to 112 BC. Can we narrow that range even further?

Most modern scholars date the book to the third century BC during the Greek rule in Palestine. Others, however, have pointed to evidence that Esther was written at a much earlier date. Some, for example, argue that the language used to describe dates in Esther points to a late fifth century date.

Also, the lack of any reference to Greek culture suggests that the book was written during or before the first half of the fourth century BC (around 330 BC or earlier). There are no words of Greek origin, but many words of Persian origin. Further, the book displays an accurate knowledge of life in Susa during the time of Xerxes, which also points to an early date.

Linguistics is one way of dating a text. We can tell today pretty quickly whether an English text was written in the 1900's, the 1800's, or the 1700's just by looking at the words that are used, how they are spelled, and how they are arranged in sentences. The same is true with ancient texts. For Esther, these factors point to an early date for the text. For example, one of Haman's sons in Esther 9:9 is named Vaizatha.

“The diphthong ‘ai’ shifted to ‘e’ between the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. This indicates that the name transmitted in Esther is strikingly old and authentic.”

It is probably best to date Esther as being written during the Persian period, and no later than around 350 BC. As for the human author of the inspired text, we are not told, but some have suggested Ezra or Mordecai.

Esther 1:1-3

Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:) 2 That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, 3 In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:

As we discussed, feasting is one of the themes in Esther, and in fact the book of Esther begins with a feast given by King Xerxes. The events of the banquet lead to the king's anger against Queen Vashti and to her subsequent departure. That departure sets the stage for Esther to come forth and deliver her people.

Verse 1 begins with the phrase "Now it came to pass," which is the same type of introduction we find in books such as Joshua and Judges. (Joshua 1:1 – "Now after the death of Moses the servant of the LORD it came to pass..." and Judges 1:1 – "Now after the death of Joshua it came to pass...") The phrase "it came to pass" is found 453 times in the Bible. The book of Luke uses the phrase 40 times. Those who argue that Esther is not historical must admit that the book presents itself as a history, and they must explain why their reasoning as to Esther would not also mean that Judges and Joshua and the others books where that phrase occurs are likewise fictional.

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew form of the name of the Persian king called Xerxes I by the Greeks. We saw him briefly in Ezra 4:6. We also saw him in Daniel 11:2, where Daniel told us about Xerxes 100 years before Xerxes was born. Xerxes reigned from 486 to 465 BC, and from his father Darius the Great he inherited the great Persian Empire that extended from India to Ethiopia (as verse 1 tells us and as history confirms). This was the largest empire known up until that time.

Critics argue that the "127 provinces" in verse 1 is inaccurate because Herodotus listed only 20 satrapies. Fair-minded critics, however, notice that verse 1 does not say there were 127 satrapies, but rather that there were 127

provinces (or legal jurisdictions). The Hebrew word translated “province” no doubt refers to a subdivision of a satrapy. In Daniel 2:49, the same Hebrew word refers to the province of Babylon, and in Ezra 2:1 and Nehemiah 7:6 it refers to the province of Judea. (Although Daniel does refer to the leaders of the 120 provinces as “satraps” in 6:1.) As for the different numbers between Daniel and Esther, I could point you to any number of sources that say the United States has 48 states!

One interesting suggestion was that 127 is symbolic of Xerxes’ reign over the entire earth, being a combination of 12 (the number of God’s people), 10 (the number of completeness), and 7 (the number of perfection). But I think we must reject that option because Esther is a historical text that is not presented using apocalyptic language. Although apocalyptic language is properly interpreted by assuming the language is figurative unless forced to do otherwise, historical narrative is properly interpreted according to the opposite rule. There is no reason to understand 127 here as a figurative number. (Be very careful of commentaries that try to read something mystical or figurative into every number they encounter.)

Susa (Shushan in the KJV) had been the capital of ancient Elam. Darius I rebuilt it and used it as his main residence before he moved his capital to Persepolis. Xerxes also had his main residence at Persepolis, but he lived in Susa during the winter. Daniel previously had a vision at Susa (Daniel 8:2), and later Nehemiah would serve in Susa as cupbearer to Xerxes’ son, Artaxerxes I (Nehemiah 1:1).

Xerxes ascended to the throne in 486 BC at the age of 32. The third year of his reign was 483 BC, a few years before his famous expedition against the Greek mainland. Rulers used banquets to show their greatness and to reward their loyal subjects. Herodotus described banquets with 15,000 guests. The Assyrian king Ashurnazirpal once gave a feast with nearly 70,000 guests.

At the Louvre Museum in Paris (as shown on the handout) you can see a large column and part of a wall covered with many-colored mosaics from the palace and the great banquet hall built by Darius in Susa – the same place where many

of these events took place. These items were likely seen by Nehemiah and Esther.

Verse 3 refers to “Persia and Media” rather than “Media and Persia.” This ordering attests to the book’s historical accuracy. Prior to the days of Cyrus, the Medes had been the dominant partner. Cyrus won the allegiance of both nations and united them because his father was Persian and his mother was a Mede. By the time of Xerxes, Persia was the dominant partner within the joint empire.

As we saw, Verse 3 gives us a time frame for the events in this first chapter – the third year of Xerxes’ reign. We know from extra-Biblical history that Xerxes’ campaigns against the Greeks began a few years after this time and ended four years after this time. When we get to Esther 2:16, we will see that Esther’s reign as Queen began in the 7th year of Xerxes’ reign. This otherwise unexplained gap of 4 years between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 fits perfectly with the evidence of Xerxes’ campaign against the Greeks. It may also explain what we saw about Xerxes in Ezra 4:6 – “And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem.” Note that the letter was sent in the beginning of his reign and that no response is recorded. Perhaps that is because Xerxes was not around to give a response but instead was off fighting the Greeks.

Verses 1-3 thus provide the setting and the time frame for the events that will follow: the Persian court in Susa in the fifth century BC.

LESSON 18

Esther 1:4-8

4 When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days. 5 And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace; 6 Where were white, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble. 7 And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king. 8 And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

Verses 4-8 tell us about the splendor of King Xerxes.

Persia's wealth and magnificence even impressed Alexander the Great. More than 100 years later, Alexander entered this same palace and found 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion and 270 tons of gold coins. Excavations at Susa between 1884 and 1886 dug up many treasures from this very same palace, and they are now displayed at the Louvre in Paris (as shown on our handout from last week).

The same critics who complain about the 127 provinces in verse 1 also complain about the 180-day banquet in verse 4. But, again they need to read more carefully before they start griping. Verse 4 does not say that the banquet lasted 180 days. The feast itself, as verse 5 tells us, lasted only 7 days.

Most likely, Xerxes had some sort of public event that lasted 180 days. And those six months may have been a time of planning for the military campaign against the Greeks, which would explain why the nobles and princes of Persia and Media were before Xerxes in verse 3.

In fact, turning to Herodotus, this banquet corresponds well with the great war counsel of 483 BC. In Book 7 of **The Histories**, Herodotus writes:

“After the conquest of Egypt, when he was on the point of taking in hand the expedition against Athens, Xerxes called a conference of the leading men of the country, to find out their attitude towards the war and explain to them his own wishes.”

Herodotus records the following words of Xerxes at that counsel, which may have been spoken at the same banquet described here in Esther:

“For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you my purpose.”

Xerxes then proceeded to describe the upcoming Greek invasion, and he told the leading men that they would receive lavish gifts in exchange for their support.

If this is what was going on at this banquet, then it was important that Xerxes display his wealth and power to convince everyone that he would make good on his promises. And anyone who made Xerxes look powerless before this important audience would definitely make the king very angry. (But who would ever do that!)

Verses 6-7 emphasize the incredible luxury of the Persian palace.

Herodotus relates an incident that occurred during Xerxes’ retreat from Greece in which the king left one of his tents behind in an abandoned camp. The Greeks were astonished to find gold and silver **couches** in the tent, and they wondered what such a rich Persian king would want with Greece!

The word translated “edict” or “law” in verse 8 is used 19 times in the book, and each time it refers to a royal decree.

Verse 8 begins literally, “And the drinking was according to the rule: let there be no restraining.” Usually a toastmaster would indicate when everyone was to drink, but here the people could drink whenever they pleased. This detail suggests that the banquet was not only luxurious but was also licentious. We

are reminded of the drunken banquet in Daniel 5 that preceded the fall of Babylon to Persia, and now we see a drunken banquet preceding Persia's failed campaign against Greece.

So, as we will often do, let's pause and ask whether and how these opening verses are emphasizing the key themes of the book - reversal and feasting.

The feasting theme is easy to spot, but what about the reversal theme? Can we see that theme in these opening verses? And the answer is yes.

Everyone who read Chapter 1 originally knew as they read how these events were going to turn out for the great king Xerxes – his campaign against the Greeks was a total failure! They would have known that Xerxes returned from that campaign four years later with depleted power and a depleted treasury. This **unstated** reversal in Chapter 1 sets the stage for the other reversals that will follow in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther could have easily begun with a record of Xerxes' great defeat, but it did not. Instead the book begins with a display of Xerxes' great wealth and power. Why? Perhaps because it better shows the theme of reversal.

And there is one more hint of reversal in these opening verses. This elaborate description of a foreign palace is unusual in the Bible. Only the description of the first temple receives similar treatment. But that first temple had been destroyed and now rebuilt in a much less grand manner. Perhaps the book of Esther wants the reader to see the beauty of the first temple as having been moved to Persia, along with the people of God. If so, then we are being reminded of yet another humiliating reversal.

So perhaps these opening verses are very subtly showing us two reversals – the reversal of Xerxes and Persia regarding the failed Greek invasion, and the reversal of God's own people as they and the beauty of their temple had been carried off to Persia.

Esther 1:9

9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.

For those who may have wondered whether feasting was really a theme of this book, note that we have now had two feasts in the first 9 verses.

Verse 9 tells us about Queen Vashti's feast, and the fact that she gave a feast tells us that she had liberty to make such decisions and to take such actions. We will later see Queen Esther exercising similar powers.

These opening verses show the King and the Queen acting separately, which perhaps foreshadows the trouble that will soon come between them.

Women were present at royal Persian banquets, but typically the men and women were separated once the drinking started. Only the concubines were left for entertainment after the other women had left. Josephus explains Vashti's upcoming decision simply as her reluctance to break this protocol.

And who is Vashti? As we discussed at length in the introduction, I think the most likely answer is that Vashti from the book of Esther is the same person as Amestris, the person that Herodotus identifies as the queen and the mother of the next king, Artaxerxes. But, as we also discussed, if that is correct, then Vashti was evil and vengeful, which may cause us to change our view of Vashti (which is otherwise based entirely on this one event in her life).

Esther 1:10-12

10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king, 11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on. 12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

Verses 10-12 describe a command from the King and the Queen's denial of that command.

To understand the undercurrents of verses 10-12, we need to remember the purpose of this great feast. Verse 4 tells us that Xerxes wanted to display his splendor and glory, and most likely that was to gain support for his campaign against the Greeks. The beautiful Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown would have been seen as a living trophy of the king's splendor and glory, and so he wanted to show her off.

Why did the king send seven eunuchs ("chamberlains" in the KJV) to go and get the queen?

The eunuch part is self-explanatory, but why seven? Some suggest that seven may have been needed to carry her while she was seated in her royal litter. In any event, they are listed by name in verse 10 for a reason – their names serve to verify this historical record of the event.

Herodotus tells us something interesting about the Persian view of alcohol – the Persians drank as they deliberated matters of state:

“Moreover it is [the Persians'] custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk, and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. And when they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when they are drunk.”

The ancients believed that intoxication put them in closer touch with the spiritual world. If Herodotus was correct, then drinking would have been an essential element of Xerxes' war counsel – which is yet another historical fact that we find in the book of Esther.

A key event in the entire book occurs in verse 12 – Queen Vashti refuses to come before Xerxes, the most powerful person on earth at that time. And the question is ... why? Why did the queen refuse the king's order?

Why? That is a question we will ask many times in our study of this book – why? What was the person’s motivation? Why did the person do something or not do something? What was the person thinking? Sometimes in this book, we are told what someone was thinking, but other times we are not. Vashti falls in the latter category. We know only what she did; we are not told why he did it. So, of course, the speculation runs rampant! Here is how one commentary described the situation:

“Vashti could have been motivated by any of the following: anger, pride, disdain, dignity, modesty, marital fidelity, love, royal decorum or early feminism. Any of these motives, or a heady cocktail of them all, could have prompted her refusal. One thing is certain – refuse she did, and in doing so she set in motion an epoch-making train of events.”

Herodotus describes another banquet at which the women present were assaulted by drunken men (5.18). And, as we mentioned earlier, almost any woman (evil or not) would have been reluctant to appear before a group of men who had been drinking for seven days straight.

And yet this was not just any woman – this was the royal wife of King Xerxes of Persia, the most powerful man on earth. And this was not just any event – this was the banquet at which Xerxes was planning his invasion of Greece and at which he most needed to impress his princes and generals with his royal power and authority.

Vashti could hardly have picked a worse time to refuse the king’s request. So, again, we must ask, why?

Perhaps she was opposed to the Greek invasion, and rightly so as it would later turn out!

Perhaps there was a conflict between the royal command and existing Persian law or custom. Josephus suggests that Vashti refused to appear before the king “out of regard to the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers.” [Antiquities, 11.6]

The answer the Jewish rabbis offered is that the king wanted Vashti to appear naked before him. To reach that conclusion, they add a single word to verse 11, so that instead of reading "to bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal," it instead reads "to bring Vashti the queen before the king with **only** the crown royal!" However, we interpret verse 11, we do know that coming before the princes to show them her beauty would have meant coming unveiled. So modesty could have been a motivation even absent the rather lurid suggestion of the Jewish rabbis.

Jewish legends over the years have added quite a bit to the events in Chapter 1. Even the explanation that Vashti had been commanded to appear unclothed did not satisfy all the Rabbis. Some of them could not see why such a shameless creature as Vashti (as they considered her) should be unwilling to come even in that condition.

In Jewish legend, Vashti is sometimes said to have resisted appearing because the angel Gabriel, to effect the salvation of the Jews, had afflicted her with leprosy. Jewish tradition also depicts Vashti as the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar and daughter of Belshazzar. Jewish lore further views Vashti's own banquet as filled with political intrigue – the nobles' wives were captives being used as insurance that their husbands not rebel against Xerxes. None of that is in the text.

We should also mention one intriguing theory that was discussed earlier. Vashti may have refused to appear at the drunken banquet when ordered to do so by Xerxes because she was pregnant at the time with Artaxerxes, who later became the next king. We know that Artaxerxes was eighteen when he came to the throne in around 465 BC, which would mean that he was born in 483 BC, shortly after the lavish banquet we see here.

As we struggle to come up with a motivation for Vashti's refusal to appear before the king, we should step back and ask a broader question – why aren't we given her motivation? Why is the text silent on that key question? Anyone reading Chapter 1 would naturally be puzzled by her response and would

wonder why she did what she did. Why doesn't the Bible tell us? The book of Esther certainly provides motivations elsewhere – why not here?

The book of Esther is a textbook on divine providence. It shows us how God's providence works. And what we find is that God's providence works in part through human behavior, and we see here that that behavior can flow from even the most ambiguous and confused of motives. One seemingly insignificant event leads to another in the opening chapters of Esther, and in that mysterious chain of human actions the promise of the covenant made long before between God and his people is upheld and fulfilled.

It is telling that the book of Esther does not begin with Mordecai or Esther. It does not begin by retelling the history of the Jews. It begins instead with the Persian king Xerxes, who neither knew nor worshiped God. A completely pagan king decides for purely worldly reasons to give a banquet. On the last day of the banquet, he decides to treat the men of his empire to a good look at his beautiful Queen Vashti. She decides not to obey him. He decides. He decides. She decides. With these decisions, this group of foreigners sets in motion a chain of events that takes on a life of its own. Why? Because God used that chain of events to bring about good things for his people. And do we think God is no longer doing that?

But back to our question - why aren't we told their motivations? Because Vashti's motivations are irrelevant. Because Xerxes' motivations are irrelevant. Was Vashti courageous? Was Vashti modest? Was the king cruel? It matters not. God would use their decisions and their actions to bring about good things for his people without regard to their motivations.

The events in the book of Esther provide an example of the great promise in Romans 8:28 – “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

We often talk about God opening doors for us, but it is interesting to think that we also open doors for God. We have free will, so we can decide to open door

A or open door B. Whichever door we choose, for good or evil, God can turn our decision into something good.

Isn't that exactly what happened with Joseph's brothers?

Genesis 50:20 – “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.”

Joseph's brothers made an evil choice, but God turned their bad choice into something good for his people. Their evil choice opened a door for God to do something wonderful. Had that door not been opened, God would have used something else or someone else to accomplish his plans, but that particular open door allowed God to use Joseph for that purpose.

We see a very subtle message in these verses – this all-powerful king was not in charge!

We see very early in this book an answer to the questions, “Who is really in charge? And who should be obeyed, and at what cost?” These verses are doing more than just providing an explanation for why Esther would soon enter the scene. These verses are also showing us a glimpse of a central question in this book. **Who is really in charge?** Could it be that the one who is really in charge is not even named anywhere in this book of Esther?

Verse 12 tells us that King Xerxes became enraged. One reason for his great wrath was no doubt because the refusal had occurred in front of his officers and nobles. He needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey him! We see in these opening verses the inner weakness of what was outwardly the most powerful empire on earth.

One reason Vashti's decision took such courage was that she no doubt knew what kind of man Xerxes was. History records a number of events attesting to Xerxes' instability, not the least of which involved his punishment of the ocean. That strange event is described as follows in a 1913 text by Ellis and Horne:

“Darius was ... succeeded by his son Xerxes, under whom the war with Greece was carried to a disastrous climax. Xerxes was accounted the handsomest man of his time, but proved also the most feeble; he was as idle and foolish as his father had been active and wise. Inexperienced in warfare, Xerxes planned an expedition of numbers so vast that he expected them completely to overwhelm the rebellious Greeks. It was not easy for a Persian army to travel all the way to far-off Greece, and Xerxes was weary of the march before it was well begun. When at length his forces reached the strait which separates Asia from Europe, a bridge of ships was built from shore to shore. A storm swept this away, and Xerxes showed his petty wrath by commanding his soldiers to give the sea three hundred lashes with whips, as if it had been a human slave. He also had a set of fetters thrown into the water as a symbol of its bondage to him. After this punishment, though possibly not because of it, the sea behaved better; the bridge of ships held firm, and Xerxes entered Europe.”

Herodotus tells us that Xerxes once beheaded the men building a bridge during his Greek campaign simply because a storm delayed its completion. And this was the person whom Vashti openly defied and embarrassed! Again, I think this is very strong evidence that Vashti and Amestris are one and the same person, and that she was pregnant with the royal heir at the time of these events. She knew the king would not harm her.

As I mentioned in our introduction, while we often view Vashti as noble and heroic, that is not the case with all commentators. Many ancient Jewish and Christian sources paint Vashti as a wicked and rebellious woman for refusing to obey her husband. Even Martin Luther used Vashti as a negative example in his writings about divorce, urging husbands in some situations to “take an Esther and let Vashti go.” (We will have more to say about divorce when we get back to the book of Ezra!)

Esther 1:13-15

13 Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king’s manner toward all that knew law and judgment: 14 And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king’s face, and which sat the first in the kingdom;) 15 What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

In verses 13-15, the King discusses the problem with his counselors. It was customary for a Persian king to have such counselors, and it was also customary to sometimes have them killed when they angered him – as Darius II and Cambyses are both known to have done.

That these seven counselors “saw the king’s face” means that they had special access to the king. Herodotus described them this way: “any of the seven may enter the palace unannounced, except when the king was in bed with a woman” (3.84).

Verse 14 tells us that these counselors “sat first in the kingdom,” which means they were highest in the kingdom. That description was likely literal as well as figurative – they likely always sat next to the king at state occasions or banquets, as they seem to have been doing at this banquet. Ezra 7:14 also speaks of the king’s seven counselors.

Verse 13 says that they knew the times, which means that they used astrology and other forms of divination. Again, we see our big question in verse 13, “Who is really in charge?” Is it fate? Is it luck? Is what happens to us determined by the stars? Or is there a greater power involved? Perhaps the one who created those stars! What we see in this verse is the collision of world views that we discussed in the introduction.

What can we say about the names in verse 14? “Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan?” One of them has a speaking role in verse 16, but the others do not. Why are we given all of their names? (And remember that we were also given the names of the seven eunuchs back in verse 10.) Why?

First and foremost, as we also said for verse 10, having these specific names certainly adds to the historical nature of the text. In fact, the first name, Carshena, has been found at Persepolis in the Fortification Tablets.

All of the names seem to be Persian, and that may suggest a second reason why we are given the list of names. One commentator suggests that the very

sound of these foreign names would have been “ludicrous to Hebrew ears,” and so the list may have been given to add to the “impression of a dumb chorus” advising the king. (Not only do we see the great king Xerxes in his royal palace, but we see his group of seven esteemed advisers: Doc, Sleepy, Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Bashful and Sneezzy!) There is certainly an aspect of humor and mockery here when it comes to great king Xerxes, as we will continue to see as the chapter continues.

In verse 15, the king asks these seven counselors what he should do with the rebellious Queen Vashti.

LESSON 19

Esther 1:16-18

16 And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus. 17 For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not. 18 Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

Verses 16-18 describe the seriousness of Vashti's offense against the king.

We have already noted that, unlike some other books in the Old Testament, the book of Esther is driven primarily through narration than through dialogue. Memucan's advice in verses 16–20 is the largest block of direct speech in the chapter and one of the largest in the entire book.

Memucan, one of the king's seven advisors, explains that it was an offense not just against the king but also against all husbands. When the word gets out about what Vashti has done, it will cause other wives to “despise their husbands in their eyes.”

This answer was clever because it relieved the king from a charge that he was acting out of personal animosity. Instead, the king was acting on behalf of husbands everywhere! What could be more noble! Memucan has elevated the king's marital problem into a national crisis!

And the Rabbis, as they so often did, had an additional explanation for Memucan's plan. According to rabbinic tradition, Memucan had been having problems with his own disobedient wife at home, and he saw this event as an opportunity to bring her into line!

Before we look at the plan, let's review the fear that the plan is supposed to solve. The fear in verse 17 is that women everywhere will learn what the queen has done, and that will cause them to follow her bad example. So it would seem that any plan should be primarily concerned with keeping news of this event under tight control so that no one learns about what the queen has done. Is that the plan we are about to see? Let's take a look.

Esther 1:19-22

19 If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she. 20 And when the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small. 21 And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan: 22 For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.

Verses 19-22 describe the Queen's punishment and the King's decree.

For her punishment, Vashti would lose her royal position and never again be allowed to come before the king.

Verse 19 also says that in Vashti's place would be put someone who "is better than she." Notice that for the first time in the book, Queen Vashti is referred to simply as "Vashti" in verse 19. She has experienced a big reversal!

The irrevocability of the king's command in verse 19 is also mentioned in Daniel 6, where Darius (**not** Xerxes' father, Darius the Great) was manipulated by his administrators into issuing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer.

As we discussed in the introduction, many critics complain that there is no evidence of such irrevocable decrees outside of the Bible. As one noted:

"It is hard to conceive of a legal system which does not allow for emendation of its laws. Furthermore, there is no attestation of such an idea

in any Persian source. Nor is there any mention of it in Greek sources, which presumably would not hesitate to point out peculiarities in the Persian way of doing things, as they do when they mock the splendor of the Persian court, for example.”

That commentator suggests that the word “repealed” in verse 19 should be translated “transgressed,” and that the irrevocable decree against the Jews we will see later was irrevocable only in the sense that once the order had gone out to all the provinces the damage could not be undone because there was no mechanism for recalling the decree. But that explanation would not explain the events in Daniel 6.

And there are some other big problems with that commentator. First, complaining that there is no evidence outside the Bible ignores the fact that the Bible itself is evidence. In fact, Esther is perhaps the best source of evidence that we have for what was going on in Persia at this particular period of time. And Daniel is also evidence. It is illogical to ignore the Biblical evidence of irrevocable Persian laws.

And, second, as for the Greeks not mentioning the irrevocable laws, that is not a certainty at all. As we saw in the introduction, Herodotus confirmed that King Xerxes was “compelled” by his own laws. Doesn’t that tell us that Xerxes could not alter those laws? Otherwise, how could those laws compel him? If the king was the law (as with most ancient and modern despots), then how could the king be compelled by the law? And even if the Greeks did not mention it, that does not prove it did not exist. It is hard to know what the Greeks did not tell us!

Also, we have already seen an example in Ezra 4:21 where a royal decree was carefully worded in such a way so as to permit its change – and that sort of careful wording may explain why this was not often an issue. Perhaps the problem arose only with **hastily** created laws, which certainly describes the irrevocable decrees in Esther and Daniel. (Even today we have some experience with hastily created legislation that is seemingly irrevocable.)

Now let's go back to the question we asked with the previous verses - what was the problem that this irrevocable law was intended to address? The problem was the the king did not want anyone to hear about what the queen had done to him. Is that what this new law prevents? No. In fact the reverse is true - the new law from the king ends up publicizing his embarrassing plight to the entire empire! Afraid that all women of the empire would hear about what Vashti had done, the king ends up sending a dispatch about her defiance to every province in the empire!

Did the powerful king see the foolishness of this advice from his wise men? No. He did not. Verse 21 says that "the saying pleased the king and the princes." They all think it sounds like a great plan!

And what about Vashti's punishment for not wanting to appear before the king? Her punishment is that she is not allowed to appear before the king! As one commentator described it:

"Memucan's advice creates the very hullabaloo he had wanted to squelch and prevents Vashti from doing precisely what she had refused to do."

But perhaps the punishment was appropriate: If the Queen will not come when summoned, then let her never come ever again!

And note that there is no careful wording in this decree that would prevent it from being irrevocable. In fact, Memucan wants to be sure that the decree is irrevocable. He stresses in verse 19 that it cannot be altered, and in verse 20 he wants it published everywhere, which would really make it hard for the king to ever change it. Why?

If Vashti was the vengeful Amestris, then no doubt Memucan wanted to make sure she never regained her power! (But she later did just that when her son came to power, and so perhaps Memucan later heard from Vashti once again!)

So where are we then with this description of the most powerful person on earth? I think one commentary answers that question very well:

“Xerxes, as we quickly learn, is weak-willed, fickle, and self-centered. He and his advisers are a twittery, silly-headed, cowardly lot who need to hide behind a law to reinforce their status in their homes.”

As we have already noted, Esther is one of the funniest books in the Bible. As one commentator has noted, “The book’s incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks.”

But is humor appropriate in a book that describes the near genocide of God’s people? The simplest answer is that by the time Esther was written, the threat had passed and all who read it knew of the happy ending.

Another commentary provides a different reason:

“Humor, especially the humor of ridicule, is a device for defusing fear. The book teaches us to make fun of the very forces that once threatened – and will threaten again – our existence, and thereby makes us recognize their triviality as well as their power.”

God laughs at the pretensions of earthly powers.

Psalm 2:4 – “He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision.”

Psalm 37:12-13 – “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming.”

Psalm 59:8 – “But thou, O LORD, shalt laugh at them; thou shalt have all the heathen in derision.”

We see God laughing in the book of Esther! In the context of human fear, divine laughter breaks the tension. It brings us relief. God will prevail over the powers of any and every age! The book of Esther reminds us that deliverance comes from God – and that God’s people should always be a confident people! We can laugh in the face of fear!

But we should pause here and notice something about the author of this book: this author was very brave! One thing that all despots have in common is that they do not like being laughed at! Yes, God is not mentioned in this book, but

do we see God in the mere existence of this book? One commentator thinks so:

“The security and confidence of the author, who could comment in this way on the highest ruler in the contemporary world as well as on the court and its intrigues, is striking, and witnesses in a totally unconscious way to the efficacy of faith in the living God.”

If we are still on the lookout for themes in this book (and we are!), then we may see another theme here: the theme of excess. In this chapter, we have seen an excess of power, an excess of possessions, and an excess of drinking. And here, one woman defies her husband, and suddenly there is a national crisis! And the law is not limited to that one woman, but applies to all women everywhere! Let’s be on the lookout for other examples of that theme of excess.

The command in verse 22 is curious. The KJV reads, “that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.” A more accurate translation is: “that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.”

The traditional view is that the king ordered everyone to speak only their father’s native language in their house, which some argue would have been an odd decree from a Persian king. But the most likely reason for the edict is that the use of the man’s language in his home was a sign of his leadership, which fits well with the context of the edict.

Another possibility for this odd requirement is that it addresses a problem similar to what we see in Nehemiah 13:23-24, where Jewish men married foreign wives, and their children could not speak Hebrew. Perhaps the Persians had a similar problem, but if so, there is nothing in the context about it.

Yet another possibility is that Xerxes was following the lead of Cyrus in encouraging the development of minority cultures in his empire by allowing

various languages to be spoken. Support for that view might be found in verse 22's requirement that the decree be provided in various languages.

A final possibility is that this phrase does not belong here at all, but is the result of scribe who mistakenly recopied the earlier phrase "to every people after their language" twice. The "scribal error" explanation is never my favorite, but we know it happened on rare occasion. Support for such having happened here might come from the Septuagint, which omits that final phrase in verse 22.

So where are we at the end of Chapter 1? Queen Vashti has left the building, and her exit has prepared the way for someone "better than she" (verse 19) to replace her.

"Chapter 1 ends with the king rushing to reach the post office before it closes. Within the space of a few verses the high and mighty [Xerxes] has been defied, manipulated, and roundly humiliated. While this much is obvious to his advisors, his citizens, and now to us, the readers, [Xerxes] seems largely out of touch with reality. It is a characteristic that will surface again and again in subsequent chapters."

And what will happen when Esther appears? Will she be obedient to the king? Will she be under the king's thumb? Will she be powerless? Let's see.

Esther 2:1-4

After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her. 2 Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king: 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women; and let their things for purification be given them: 4 And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king; and he did so.

The phrase "after these things" in verse 1 does not specify how much later these events took place.

Verse 16 will tell us that Esther came before the king in the seventh year of his reign, which would be four years after the events in Chapter 1, which Esther 1:3 tells us occurred in the third year of his reign.

Xerxes' disastrous campaign against the Greeks occurred between these two events. That loss depleted his treasuries and discredited him in the eyes of his subjects. Herodotus describes the king's life after that defeat as one focused on sensual overindulgence. The king had affairs with the wives of some of his generals, which, among other things, led to his assassination in his bedroom in 465 BC, the 21st year of his reign.

It seems to some from verse 1 that the king regretted his irrevocable decree against Queen Vashti, but that is not what the text says. It says simply that the king **remembered** Vashti. As one commentary notes, that phrase is "wonderfully ambiguous!"

If Vashti was the evil and vengeful Amestris, then perhaps his remembering of Vashti and what she had done in verse 1 was not entirely a remembrance with fondness! It may be that after all these events, Xerxes was more than ready for a new queen! In any event, the decree was irrevocable, and so in these verses we see the beginning of a search for a replacement.

In verse 1 the king remembers "what was decreed against her." Wasn't that the king's own decree? Or was it really? I think we see in that phrase both the king distancing himself from his own decree and also a subtle reminder that the decree was not the king's own idea. In fact, as we continue through this book, we might start to wonder whether this all-powerful king ever had an idea all on his own!

Remember that we are on the look out for other examples of the theme of excess. We didn't have to wait very long! Verse 2 says: "And let the king appoint officers in **all** the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together **all** the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace."

The end of verse 3 describes beauty treatments. The Hebrew word for this is “rubbings,” which is apparently a reference to a massage with perfumed oils. The noun actually comes from a verb meaning “to scour” or “to polish.”

If the king had really been **fondly** remembering Vashti in verse 1, he seems to have gotten over it by verse 4: “And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen **instead of Vashti**. And the thing **pleased the king**; and he did so.”

On the surface, this search sounds like a beauty contest, but for the women involved it would not have been a pleasant experience. They were uprooted from their homes and taken to live in the king’s harem.

A Persian king could have had any woman he wanted, and history tells us about the suffering the Persian kings caused in satisfying their personal desires. And the suffering was not limited to women: Herodotus reports that 500 young boys were taken each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court.

According to Herodotus, Persian kings found their wives from among the noble families or from among the families of their seven closest advisors. (Perhaps this explains why those same seven advisors were so eager to see Vashti banished.)

But Plutarch reports that other Persian kings sometimes married women from outside those sources, which seems to be what Xerxes was about to do here, and also what his father Darius the Great had done.

Esther 2:5-9

5 Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite; 6 Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away. 7 And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter. 8 So it came to pass, when the king’s commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were

gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women. 9 And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.

We have a shift in scene in verse 5. Suddenly we are reading, not about the great and powerful king, but about two obscure Jews living nearby.

The Jews are mentioned for the first time in verse 5, and it is interesting that they are spoken of in the third person - "there was a certain Jew." One commentator suggests that while the inspired author was a Jew, he wrote the book as though it were a Persian court chronicle written by a non-Jew. If so, that might help explain some of the other unique features of the book.

The phrase "who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away" in verse 6 has been the source of some controversy. Why? Because the event referenced in verse 6 occurred in 597 BC, which would make Mordecai over 120 years old if he was the one who had been carried away.

The most common solution is to read verse 6 as referring not to Mordecai but instead to Kish, the great grandfather of Mordecai. That solves the chronological problem, but commentaries seem to agree that that view "is by no means the natural interpretation of the Hebrew syntax."

Another way to address the difficulty is to read verse 6 as applying to Mordecai, but to be saying that Mordecai had been carried away in the person of his forefather. That is, when Kish was carried away, Kish's future descendants had also been carried away, including those, such as Mordecai, who were born in captivity.

But why does the text go to such lengths to connect Mordecai with these particular ancestors? Because something very subtle is going on here in the

text. The names in Mordecai's genealogy in the mind of any Jew would immediately associate Mordecai with King Saul, another Benjaminite: Kish was the father of Saul (1 Samuel 9:1-2), and Shimei was the man from Saul's family who cursed David when he fled from Absalom (2 Samuel 16:5). Why is that association with King Saul important? We will answer that question when we meet Haman.

The fact that Mordecai's family was taken into captivity with Jehoiachin implies that his family most likely belonged to the upper classes of Jewish society.

And we see some subtle foreshadowing in verse 6 - Esther's family had previously been carried away or removed. In fact, the Hebrew text uses variations of the root word "remove" (galah) four times in one verse. Is Esther about to be removed again? Will she become a double exile?

The Babylonian name Mordecai ("man of Marduk") refers to Marduk, the chief god of the Babylon pantheon. If Mordecai also had a Hebrew name, we do not know it. Recall that Daniel and his three friends had both Hebrew and Babylonian names.

Is there any evidence outside the Bible of Mordecai? Perhaps. In a text from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes that was discovered in 1904 at Persepolis, archaeologists found a reference to a man named "Marduka" who was an accountant on an inspection tour from Susa. Some suggest this accountant was none other than Mordecai.

In verse 7, we finally meet Esther. Mordecai had adopted his cousin Esther because her parents were dead.

Esther is the only person in the book with two names given in the book. We already know that it was common for Jews to have both a Hebrew name as well as a name from the culture in which they were living. Hadassah means myrtle, and Esther may be the Persian word for "star," or it may be a Hebrew transliteration of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war. The root

Hebrew word for Esther means concealed or hidden. By mentioning both of her names, the text may be stressing that Esther was a woman with two identities, one of which was hidden. “She is both grand gentile goddess and humble Hebrew flower.”

If Mordecai refers to the false god Marduk and if Esther refers to the false god Ishtar, then perhaps the text is again asking the question, “Who is in charge?” Will Mordecai turn to Marduk for help? Will Esther turn to Ishtar for help? Or will they instead turn to the one true God who is not named anywhere in this book? And there is some irony in the rescue of God’s people by Jews named for the false gods of Babylon and Persia.

How many women were brought before the king? We don’t know, but Josephus says there were 400.

The phrase “Esther also was taken” suggests that she and the others were not a given a choice. Although the passive voice does not require that interpretation, the same passive voice is used in verse 6 to describe the captives who were carried away from Jerusalem. The passive voice is used quite often in Esther, most likely to stress that the characters are for the most part caught up in events over which they lack control.

There is a strong note of irony in verse 9. The man who was pleased by Esther and whose favor she won was Hegai, the king’s eunuch. As one commentary observed, “Esther’s beauty was overwhelming, even to a eunuch.”

Some wonder why Esther apparently did not protest eating the unclean food as Daniel did. Although the text gives no direct answer, we will see an indirect answer in verse 10 - Esther had been instructed not to disclose her identity as a Jew.

LESSON 20

Esther 2:10-14

10 Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it. 11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her. 12 Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;) 13 Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house. 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.

We are not told why Mordecai told Esther to conceal her identity, even though it would almost certainly require her to compromise her fidelity to the Law. (Daniel, for example, did not conceal his identity, but rather seems to have proclaimed it to everyone who would listen.)

Some suggest that Esther would have had no chance of becoming queen had her nationality been known. But would that mean that Mordecai was acting out of personal ambition? One commentator wrote:

“These events came at a tragic time when many Jews (perhaps most) had forgotten their calling to separateness and had chosen to compromise their religious heritage for the sake of personal advancement under Persian domination.”

Could that charge be true of Mordecai? The text does not tell us. We are not told Mordecai's motives. We are not told that God was directing Mordecai's actions. We are not told that Mordecai was following the law. We are not told any extenuating circumstances that might help us explain why Mordecai does what he does here. All we see is what Mordecai does; we are not told why he does it.

Knowledge of Esther's identity might easily have proved very dangerous to her. We see anti-Semitism in this book, and Haman might not have been the only one who felt that way about the Jews and who was prepared to act on it.

In fact, as we will see, Haman's immediate reaction to being insulted by a Jew is to strike out against all the Jews in the land.

And so Mordecai likely had good reason to fear for Esther's safety, and particularly so if the now banished Vashti was the evil vengeful Amestris. The fact that Mordecai checked on Esther daily shows that he was very concerned about her.

Verses 12-14 reveal the process by which the girls were presented to the king. Apparently, most of the girls spent only a single night with the king, after which they moved to the house of Shaashgaz and became a concubine.

The "second house" or "second harem" in verse 14 likely means either a second group of women, or a separate wing in the harem complex.

There was no guarantee that the king would ever call them again, which meant they would be confined to what one commentator called "perpetual widowhood." After one night with the king, most of them would live the rest of their lives secluded in the harem.

The text is showing us here that the odds were heavily stacked against Esther. How could such a marginalized person in a hostile world ever make a difference for God? Only by a great reversal!

One commentator rightly reminds us that these verses highlight the inhumanity of polygamy.

When we think of polygamy, we usually think of the Mormons. Joseph Smith reportedly referred to polygamy as "the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on earth." But, of course, that "most holy and important doctrine" was quickly abandoned by most Mormons when it came to a choice between it and Utah becoming a state.

There are still some Mormons who practice polygamy, most notably the group led by Warren Jeffs, who is now jailed in Texas for his sexual abuse of children. We don't have time to say much about this now, but one thing is certain – the most reliable indicator of a man-made religion is that religions' view of sex, and particularly when there is a so-called "special revelation" from God for its leader or leaders to engage in sexual immorality. Muhammad claimed to have received such a revelation, as did both Joseph Smith and David Koresh.

Esther 2:15-18

15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her. 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

We need to pause and consider an important question that we have only hinted at so far in our discussion – is Esther portrayed here as a **positive** example or as a **negative** example?

For many, the question itself is surprising – is there any doubt that Esther is a positive role model? Yes, there is doubt, at least by some.

And remember that the inspired text has carefully concealed and will continue to conceal Esther's thoughts and motivations from us. We see her actions, but we are not told **why** she acted that way. And, quite frankly, she does not seem to rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the Law as, for example, Joseph did in Egypt or Daniel did in Babylon.

Here is what one modern commentator has said on this issue:

“How would you use this episode from Esther’s life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to powerful men? Use your body to advance God’s kingdom? The end justifies the means?”

Did Esther initially hide her identity rather than face persecution as a child of God, as some suggest? Did she engage in situational ethics, as others argue? We know that she will soon take a very courageous stand, but is Esther being courageous here?

Here is a very harsh quote from a 15th century Jewish commentator:

“Now when Mordecai heard the king’s herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? Esther too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with Xerxes.”

The text makes no attempt to vindicate Esther by explaining the extenuating circumstances or by reporting that she was operating under God’s special instructions. Later Greek translators added such explanations, even having Esther announce at one point that she abhorred “the bed of the uncircumcised.” But such is not part of the inspired text.

It cannot be an accident that the original text is silent on these questions. The reader is left to decide. Is Esther wholly righteous? Is she partly or maybe even mainly unrighteous? Did Esther start out unrighteous but later experience a reversal and become righteous?

Although we have some clues, the Bible does not explicitly answer those questions, either here or elsewhere. You will look in vain for Esther’s name on the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11 or anywhere else in the Bible outside of this book that bears her name.

Our list of friends say a lot about us, but so does our list of enemies. I think that was Jesus’ point in Luke 6.

Luke 6:26 - “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

Daniel had enemies. Joseph had enemies. Did Esther have any enemies? Verse 15 says that “Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.” Daniel rocked the boat. Joseph rocked the boat. Did Esther ever rock the boat? As one commentary noted:

In order for Esther to have concealed her ethnic and religious identity in the harem, she must have eaten, dressed, and lived like a Persian rather than an observant Jewess.

We definitely see Esther’s righteousness and courage in the book, but we may also see the opposite. And, if so, would that be surprising? How many Old Testament characters are presented as wholly righteous? A few, but not many. Don’t we more often than not see negative qualities mixed with the positive?

Also, we are in fact given one reason why Esther was doing what she was doing – she was obeying Mordecai.

As for the intercourse with Xerxes, I think the Jewish scholar had at least one thing right – it would have cost Esther her life to refuse. And perhaps God did not want Esther to pay that price because God had other plans for Esther.

The ultimate answer to the question of Esther’s character is to see the providence of God working in her life and in the events of this book. Whether righteous or not, God was able to use Esther to advance his plans for his people – and that is something we see God doing all throughout the Bible.

After the 12-month beauty treatment in verse 12, Esther is finally taken before the king in verse 16. She took with her only what Hegai suggested, perhaps trusting that he knew best what would please the king.

The tenth month was a cold, wet month in the middle of winter. The seventh year would have been 479 BC. As for why it took four years to replace Vashti, the king was away in Greece for two of these four years.

Verse 17 is a key verse in these events – King Xerxes made Esther queen instead of Vashti.

Those who believe that the book of Esther is fiction argue that these events are similar to *A Thousand and One Nights*. But in that folk tale, King Shekriya enjoyed a different bride every night, only to have her executed the next morning, which is quite different from what we read here. Again, the book of Esther is presented to us in the Bible as historical fact, and there is no reason to take it any other way.

This sudden decision suggests that the king was overwhelmed by Esther's beauty, and may explain why he chose a queen outside of the leading Persian families. Although Esther was no doubt beautiful, I think we also see here the providence of God working through Xerxes, just as God's providence had worked through Cyrus and through Pharaoh.

How does God's providence work? That is a difficult question. The best answer to that question comes from seeing examples of God's providence such as the one here.

Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther with miraculous signs and wonders? No. Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther? Absolutely.

We see God at work in all of these events, and that is why Esther is such a modern book. It is showing us how God works today, and has always worked, to provide for his people.

Miracles have come and are now gone, but God's providence has never gone. We see it in the Garden. We see it in Esther. We see it today. God has always worked to provide for his people. The age of miracles has ended, but the age of providence will never end!

The author avoids the word "marriage," although it is implied. Some commentators argue that it was a marriage beyond her control and therefore not a true marriage at all. Certainly Esther's only other choice at this point would have been death.

It is interesting to note that Jewish Esther married Gentile Xerxes at about the same time that intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles became an issue among the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. When we get back to Ezra 9 and 10, we will see Ezra's harsh condemnation of the mixed marriages and his insistence that they divorce. How would Ezra have judged this Jewish queen?

What was Esther herself thinking about all of this? Had she been swept off her feet by the attention of the most powerful man on earth? Or was she wondering why God had allowed such a horrible thing to happen to her? We are not told.

To celebrate, the king gave a great feast (one of our themes!), and the king granted a "release" in verse 18. The Hebrew word literally means "a causing to rest." It could mean a "holiday," a "remission of taxes," or "amnesty." When the false Smerdis ascended the throne, Herodotus tells us that he granted his subjects freedom from taxation and military service for a period of three years, so perhaps that is what it means here. If it did mean a remission of taxes, then no doubt it caused all of the people to love Esther as much as the king did!

The Hebrew word translated "gifts" in verse 18 literally means "portions," and the meaning is not entirely clear.

It is interesting how often the people of God found themselves in royal courts. Joseph and Moses went before Pharaoh, Daniel went before Nebuchadnezzar, and now Esther goes before Xerxes. Many prophets appeared in royal courts when charged by God to speak truth to power.

As Christians, we should never shy away from opportunities to do likewise. Who knows but that we might have come to that position for such a time as this?

For those who don't believe God's people should ever be involved in politics, I'm glad they didn't convince Esther or Joseph or Daniel of that! Christians belong wherever the battle is raging!

Esther 2:19-20

19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai sat in the king's gate. 20 Esther had not yet shewed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.

What does verse 19 mean when it says that the virgins were gathered together "the second time"? It is a difficult phrase, and it caused one commentary to declare that "verse 19 is one of the most difficult verses in all of Esther."

Here are the main theories:

- The second gathering was a gathering that followed Esther's selection as queen (with Esther's gathering being the first gathering).
- The second gathering was the gathering that occurred in the second house from verse 14.
- The second gathering was the gathering for Esther, while the first gathering must have been for Vashti.
- The Hebrew word translated "second" is close to the Hebrew word for "different," and so the original may have just said that they had gathered together at a different time.

I think the first view is the best view - the second time in verse 19 refers to a second gathering of the virgins after Esther became queen. Most likely it was a second procession of the unsuccessful contestants, perhaps intended to highlight Esther's beauty in comparison to theirs.

That Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate tells us that he was an official of some sort. One commentator suggests that after Esther became queen she had Mordecai appointed a magistrate or a judge.

The king's gate was a building with a gate within it and in which legal, civil, and commercial business was conducted. The foundations of this gate have been located at Susa (in present day Iran), and it measures 131 by 92 feet. (See the earlier handout.) It consisted of a central hall that led into the royal compound

and two rectangular side rooms. The evidence from the excavation of the gate and the palace corresponds well with the details given in Esther.

In verse 20 we are again reminded of Mordecai's command to Esther that she not reveal her identity. And we see no effort by Esther to get him to change his mind.

Later we will see Mordecai command Esther to reveal her identity – and that is when Esther will finally stand up to him and try to talk him out of it! In fact, the only time in the entire book when Esther raises any protest at all to Mordecai is found later in 4:11 where Esther protests, not Mordecai's instruction to keep her heritage hidden, but rather his command (4:8) that she reveal her heritage to the king. Again, it raises some questions about Esther.

After those events, we will see, not Mordecai commanding Esther, but rather Esther commanding Mordecai, which will be yet another example of our theme of reversal.

Esther 2:21-23

21 In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wrath, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 22 And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name. 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Why did these two eunuchs become angry? We are not told, but remember that between these events and the events in Chapter 1, the king had been humiliated in a battle against the Greeks. That humiliation may have caused this anger. We know that the king was eventually assassinated many years later under very similar circumstances.

Mordecai hears of the plot, and he tells Esther, who then tells the king. The conspirators are hanged on a tree, which may refer to death by impalement, and the events are recorded in the book of chronicles before the king.

According to Herodotus, “whenever Xerxes saw one of his officers behaving with distinction, he would find out his name, and his secretaries wrote it down, together with his city and parentage.”

Verse 22 tells us something very important about Esther – she gave credit where credit was due. And if she had not done so, these events would have turned out very differently. And there are some lessons for us here.

First, the obvious lesson is that we should also give credit where credit is due and not take unearned honors upon ourselves.

But there is also a second lesson – our seemingly small acts of integrity (which may seem like nothing to us at the time) can have huge unforeseen impacts on our lives and the lives of others – as can our seemingly small (seemingly to us anyway) acts of disobedience.

We are not living in a vacuum. People see what we do and how we live. They see our actions, they hear our words, and they perceive our priorities. Everything we do, either good or bad, creates a ripple. We need to be sure we are creating good ripples.

We don’t know where those ripples are leading or how long they are lasting. What may seem small to us at the time may be just the thing that God will use later to turn the world upside down! We cannot see the resulting chain of events, but God can.

God plays a perfect game of chess. When we make a move, God can see all of the resulting moves all the way to the end of the game. We can see only a few moves ahead, but God can see all the way to the end, and beyond.

Rather than saying that God is the perfect chess player, perhaps a better analogy is to say that God is the perfect chess coach. God is telling us through his word what moves we should make. Are we going to trust ourselves, only being able to see a few moves ahead at most, or are we going to trust God who can see everything?

The “butterfly effect” refers to the idea that small causes can have large effects – such as the wind movements created by the beating of butterfly wings leading eventually to a hurricane on the other side of the globe.

The problem is that we can’t tell which events in our lives will experience that effect. Most of them seem small at the time, but some of them may be the first wing flap that leads to a hurricane. This small decision by Esther in verse 22 to give credit to Mordecai eventually leads to the salvation of the Jewish people from an evil plot to destroy them all.

So where are we at the end of Esther 2? Queen Vashti has been replaced by Queen Esther, and Mordecai, having risen to a level of prominence, saved the king’s life and has his deeds recorded in the king’s book of chronicles.

What happens next? We finally meet the villain in Chapter 3.

Esther 3:1

After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.

In verse 1, we are introduced to Haman.

When Jews today celebrate the feast of Purim, the children are given noisemakers to use while the book of Esther is read, and they try to drown out the reader with noise every time Haman’s name is mentioned. (I am not recommending that we follow that custom this morning!)

We are not told why Haman is honored in this way, but it is interesting that the text places the promotion of Haman just where a reader would expect to see Mordecai’s promotion for foiling the plot against the king’s life.

Haman is promoted to be second only to the king, while Mordecai appears to go unrewarded. Mordecai saves the king, and Haman is promoted. Did that create some resentment in Mordecai? We are not told.

When Haman is introduced, he is identified as an Agagite (which is one of the most important words in the entire book).

This reference to Haman's nationality hints at a conflict that by this time was already centuries old. (Which in terms of Middle East conflicts is just like yesterday!)

Recall that when Mordecai was introduced in Chapter 2, he was described in a way that would have caused any Jew to immediately think of King Saul. We wondered at the time why that was so, and now we will get the answer.

There is perhaps not a single word in Esther that comes with more baggage than does the word Agagite in Esther 3:1.

Haman was an Agagite, and Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time that Saul was the first king of Israel.

The Amalekites had the dubious distinction of being the first nation to attack and try to destroy God's newly formed covenant nation. In response, God promised Moses that he would completely destroy the Amalekites and be at war with them from generation to generation.

Exodus 17:14-16 - Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24 predicted that the Israelite king would be greater than Agag (the Amalekite king).

Numbers 24:7 - Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.

Later, God instructed King Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belonged to them.

1 Samuel 15:1-3 - And Samuel said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

Saul did attack them, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best of the sheep and the cattle, in disobedience to God's command.

1 Samuel 15:13-23 - And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction." Then Samuel said to Saul, "Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night." And he said to him, "Speak." And Samuel said, "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, 'Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.' Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?" And Saul said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal." And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king."

Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal (1 Samuel 15:33).

And Saul was later killed by an Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1:1-16, which certainly drove home with some finality the lesson that he should have killed them all (although Saul himself played the key role in his own death).

God's promise in Exodus 17 to be at war with the Amalekites in every generation had been given to Moses within the context of the old covenant

being received at Sinai. Would that promise still stand for the Jews who were living in exile for having violated that same covenant? Could they expect God to remain faithful to his promises when they had not remained faithful to theirs? Would God finally give his people over to their ancient enemy? And would any of the events in this book have happened had King Saul not disobeyed God five centuries earlier?

These are the questions posed by the simple identification of Haman as an Agagite in verse 1.

LESSON 21

Esther 3:2-4

2 And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence. 3 Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? 4 Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.

In the first chapter, we saw an example of respect commanded and respect refused, and here we see a second such example.

Why did Mordecai refuse to honor Haman?

In the Greek version of Esther, Mordecai explains that he refused to bow down to Haman because he would not give the glory due to God to any man.

But, it is known from other sources that many Jews did bow to pagan officials of the Persian court because it was not seen as a religious act but rather one of court protocol. Herodotus confirms that Persians regularly bowed before high-ranking officials. Mordecai, along with everyone else, must have honored the king that way. No one in Persia who refused to bow down when Xerxes walked by would keep his head for very long!

“The Greek historians report that Persians greeted social equals with a kiss on the mouth, those of slightly higher status with a kiss on the cheek, and those of much higher status with complete prostration.”

Was Mordecai upset that Haman had been honored instead of himself after he was the one who saved the king's life?

History tells us that those honored by the king sometimes received promotions, tax exemptions, and an exemption from bowing to other nobles. Was Mordecai taking this honor upon himself as his due?

History tells us that the honor bestowed upon Haman back in verse 1 meant that he became the top official in the court, the prime minister. Such a person was also called the “king’s eye.” If Haman functioned in the latter category then he was required to report potential threats to the king. Why didn’t Mordecai get this position after he, rather than Haman, had uncovered the plot against the king?

Did Mordecai believe he deserved the honor that Haman had received? Later, he will be seen as the natural successor to that honor after Haman dies.

Or perhaps Mordecai could see what sort of person Haman was, and he saw that Haman might be yet another threat to the king, just like the one that Mordecai had earlier uncovered. Maybe Mordecai was protecting Xerxes by not honoring Haman.

I think the correct answer is most likely the same one supported by Jewish tradition, which says that no self-respecting Benjaminite would ever show reverence to a descendant of the Amalekites. (Recall that Haman was an Agagite.) The most likely reason is the ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites. And this also explains why the text specifically points out Haman’s ancestry as well as Mordecai’s ancestry, and it also explains Haman’s reaction to the slight – he will seek to kill all Jews.

Whatever caused Mordecai to refuse, the text does not tell us and it was not obvious to his colleagues in the king’s gate, who repeatedly asked him to explain his actions. And, of course, as Persians they would not have been expected to know anything about the ancient controversy between the Amalekites and the Jews.

The final phrase in verse 4, “he had told them that he was a Jew,” supports the idea that Mordecai’s refusal was based either on the animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites or on his fidelity to the Jewish law. Whatever the reason for Mordecai’s refusal to obey the king’s command, we know that it had something to do with Mordecai being a Jew.

Finally, in verse 4 Mordecai's colleagues go and tell Haman what was going on.

Would Haman have found out otherwise? Perhaps not. Perhaps Mordecai was standing in the background and not making an open show of his refusal to bow down. Perhaps Haman would never have noticed had it not been pointed out to him. He does see Mordecai later in verse 5, but would he have done so had it not been brought to his attention?

Are those three little words in verse 4 – “they told Haman” – perhaps the three most important words in these events? Aren't they the words that incited the conflict that nearly led to the destruction of God's people?

What does the Bible say? Blessed are the troublemakers? No – blessed are the peacemakers. God has something to say to those who stir up trouble – God hates it.

Proverbs 6:16-19 – “These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him: 17 A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, 18 An heart that deviseth wicked imaginations, feet that be swift in running to mischief, 19 A false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”

We should keep that list in mind as we read Esther. We will see each of those traits in the life of Haman.

Will we see some of those traits in any of the other people in this book?

For example, is Mordecai himself completely in the clear on this? I would suggest no if the only reason Mordecai refused to obey the king's command was because of something that had happened centuries earlier between Saul and Agag.

We see that same kind of hatred today in the Middle East, and we are still suffering from the problems it causes. If Mordecai refused to bow down because of his fidelity to the law, then that was the right decision – but as we have discussed, that is not the most likely reason why he refused to bow down. We are told his tribe and Haman's nationality for a reason.

If, as it seems is much more likely, Mordecai refused to honor Haman simply because Haman was an Agagite, then that was most likely wrong.

Yes, Haman was evil, but so was Nero, and 1 Peter 2:17 commanded that he be honored. Why do we obey civil authorities when their commands do not conflict with God's law? Because in such cases they are acting as a minister of God. (Romans 13:1-7) Had Mordecai given Haman the honor he was due (and the honor King Xerxes was due, because it was the king's command that Mordecai was disobeying), then much of the trouble that followed might have been avoided. (I say "might" because Haman may have been looking for any excuse to attack God's people. Mordecai was not the only person here with racial hatred.)

But, with all of that said, perhaps Mordecai believed he was following the Law in refusing to honor Haman.

Deuteronomy 25:19 – "Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee rest from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; **thou shalt not forget it.**"

So, as usual, we don't really know whether Mordecai was acting from a good motive or a bad motive. All we know is what he did, or in this case failed to do.

At the end of verse 4, we see that Mordecai had told the other servants of the king that he was a Jew. Identification with God's people almost always creates hardship. Mordecai so identified himself here. Esther had not yet done so, but her opportunity was coming.

Esther 3:5-6

5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. 6 And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.

Haman's pride and hunger for power cause him to become filled with fury at Mordecai's refusal to honor him.

Notice the difference here in how Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are presented by the text. We are left to wonder at Mordecai's reasons for refusing to bow down, and we are left to wonder about Esther's feelings in Chapter 2. But we have no doubt about how Haman feels – he is filled with fury, and we are told what Haman was thinking in verse 6. Haman is allowed no mysteries in this book!

Here is how one commentary describes Haman:

“Haman is devoured by his obsession with control. Such an obsession is a single, ineradicable notion that dominates the thoughts and feelings in spite of one's own will. Mordecai's refusal to show fear, indeed his very presence in the King's Gate, proves to Haman that, whatever his might, he lacks control: he cannot govern the Jew's emotions; he cannot even prevent his current presence in the place of power. But ironically and appropriately, Haman's obsession with control in effect imposes Mordecai's presence upon all of his thoughts and gives Mordecai power over his mind, robbing him of all pleasure he might derive from the honor, wealth, and power in which he glories. Haman makes himself miserable.”

Rather than attack Mordecai alone (which may further support the notion that Mordecai was an official of some sort), Haman decides to wipe out Mordecai's entire race.

Whatever we say about Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai's Jewishness was known, while Esther's was not. That also explains why Esther and Mordecai spoke using intermediaries. Mordecai's relation to Esther must have still been a secret because otherwise Haman would have known that Queen Esther herself was a Jew.

That Esther's Jewish ancestry was not known may tell us something about how she had been living. As one commentator noted:

“For the masquerade to last that long, Esther must have done more than eat, dress, and live like a Persian. She must have worshiped like one!”

And before we become too judgmental, perhaps we should examine our own lives. Are we hiding our true identity from the world while we eat, dress, live, and worship like the Persians who surround us? Are we hiding our own identity from the world? Do our friends think we are Persians just like they are?

Incredibly, some commentators argue that Haman's attempted genocide is so improbable that the story must be fictitious.

It is because of arguments like that one that professors get the reputation for living in isolated ivory towers unaware of what is going on around them! How can anyone living in today's world argue that an attempted genocide of the Jews (or of anyone for that matter) is too improbable to be true?

Even in Haman's day it was not incredible. When Smerdis the imposter (who had been placed on the throne by the Magi priests) was killed, every Persian in the capital took up weapons and killed every Magus they could find. For years afterward, this slaughter was an annual holiday at which the Persians would hold massive feasts to celebrate the day an immigrant community was nearly wiped out.

We should pause for a moment to say a few words about anti-Semitism, of which this attempted genocide is but one of many examples extending up until the present time.

The sad fact is that anti-Semitism has often been linked with Christianity, and that is something we must never condone. Here is a quote about the Jews by a famous German – can you guess who said it?

“First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn ... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. ... Third, I advise that all their prayer books ... be taken from them. ... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. ... Fifth, I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews.”

Which German said that? Was it Hitler? Are those statements from the Nuremberg Laws? No. That quote is from Martin Luther.

Samuel Sandmel has written that “the pogroms [organized massacres] in Eastern Europe from which my parents fled began with the ringing of church bells. I remember as an American boy how my mother used to shiver whenever the bells rang in the church near our home.” Very sad!

Certainly, we know what our attitude should be toward the Jewish race or any other race. As far as the church is concerned, there are only two groups of people in the world – those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ, and that division crosses all racial boundaries.

Colossians 3:11 - “Here [in the church] there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

I have mentioned that Esther is a very modern book, and one reason that is true is that Esther is a textbook on racial hatred and all of the problems that such hatred can create. At the heart of these events is the racial hatred between Haman and Mordecai – and that hatred, it seems, ran in both directions.

Haman’s reaction of killing all the Jews after being insulted by one Jew was certainly excessive, but can we say it is surprising? Some say (incorrectly) that it is so surprising that it is unlikely to have been true. And yet we may have witnessed a similar reaction in our own recent history. Some have argued that Adolf Hitler’s hatred of the Jews was caused partly by his rejection by a Jewish director when he had applied to art school in Vienna.

Also, we should recognize that there is a kind of twisted symmetry in Haman’s plan: Israel had been commanded to utterly exterminate the Amalekites, and now an Amalekite would attempt to exterminate Israel.

And there is also an interesting symmetry with what we saw in Chapter 1. The king was insulted by one woman, and so he issued a decree that applied to all women. Here, Haman was insulted by one Jew, and so he seeks to kill all Jews by a decree. Again, we see our theme of excess.

Esther 3:7-11

7 In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar. 8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them. 9 If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries. 10 And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy. 11 And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

We are now in the 12th year of the king's reign, which means that Esther has been queen for five years.

This was more than a century after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, more than 60 years after the first return to Jerusalem, and less than 20 years until Ezra's return to Jerusalem.

Verse 7 is an important verse. First, it explains the basis for the Feast of Purim that will be established in this book. And second, it drives home our theme of who is really in charge here, and also our theme of conflicting world views. Are the events in this book determined by the roll of dice or by something or someone else - perhaps even by someone not mentioned anywhere in the book?

In verse 7, we see the casting of something called "Pur" or plural "Purim." What is that? The author explains what it is by using the Hebrew word "goral" (translated "lot" in the KJV) in verse 7 to explain the foreign word "Pur."

In Psalm 16:5, David praised God because "you have assigned me my portion and my cup, you have made my lot [goral] secure." David praised God because it was God (rather than chance or luck) who had secured David's destiny.

As for who cast the Pur, the phrase “before Haman” or “in Haman’s presence” suggests it was not Haman himself. It was likely cast by an astrologer or a magician.

Archaeologists have unearthed purim and found them to be clay cubes inscribed with either cuneiform characters or dots just like our modern dice. The difference is that they were not used for gambling but rather were used for divination. Both Herodotus and Xenophon wrote about the Persian custom of casting lots.

This is not the only place we see the use of lots in the Bible.

- Lots were cast to determine which goat would be slaughtered and which would be driven away on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8).
- Lots were used to divide up the promised land among the tribes (Joshua 18:6-10).
- Lots were used to publicly verify the choice of Saul as king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:20-21).
- Lots were used to determine guilty parties (Joshua 7:14-18; 1 Samuel 14:42).
- Lots were used to assign responsibilities for the singers in the temple (1 Chronicles 25:8).
- In the New Testament, lots were used to determine which of the disciples would replace Judas Iscariot among the apostles (Acts 1:24-26).

Perhaps in some of those cases lots were being used simply like flipping a coin - to quickly and fairly make a decision. But I think that in some of these cases the lots were likely being used like the Urim and Thummim we discussed earlier - as a miraculous way to let God tell the people which path to take.

Acts 1:24,26 - And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, **shew whether of these two thou hast chosen** ... And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Of course, here it is Haman casting the lots rather than the people of God, but does that mean God is not involved?

What question was Haman trying to answer by casting this lot? The text does not tell us but most commentators agree that Haman was trying to determine the best time to carry out his plan to destroy the Jews. Another related possibility is that Haman was trying to figure out the best time to approach the king with his petition.

The phrase “from day to day, and from month to month” in verse 7 does not mean that the lots were cast every day throughout the year. Instead, it means that the lot was cast twice on one day - first to determine the proper day of the month, and then to determine the proper month of the year.

In verse 8, Haman uses a mixture of truth, error, and exaggeration to convince the king to follow his plan.

Haman tells the king that all the Jews disobey all the laws, even though only one Jew had disobeyed only one law. (We see our theme of excess there.)

Haman also says that the Jews are scattered throughout all the provinces, which was likely also an exaggeration, although the Jews do seem have to been fairly widespread. We know that some were in Judah at this time.

The most important thing about verse 8 is what we do not find in verse 8. As one commentator explains:

“Haman never explains that a personal feud with Mordecai is at the root of his plan. It is in Haman’s best interest to convince Xerxes that it is in the king’s best interest to destroy the Jews. How ironic that he enlists the king’s support to annihilate an ethnic group that includes a man who saved the king’s life and a woman who shares the king’s bed!”

Haman’s charges against the Jews were based on the fact that they were different – they had different laws and different customs.

Anyone who takes God’s word seriously will be different – in Esther’s day or in our own. But we must notice that Esther, it would seem, had not been very

different herself because her ancestry appears to have remained completely hidden for now going on 5 years.

(And, again, before I get too judgmental, I should ask myself whether I have known anyone for that long or longer who still does not know that I am a Christian? Have I been keeping my own secrets?)

Haman knew about something in verse 9 that would quickly sway the king to his side – money! Xerxes desperately needed to replenish his treasury after the disastrous war with Greece. Haman presumably planned to obtain this massive amount of money by plundering the property of the Jews he would kill. (And I'm sure we don't need a reminder here of how history often repeats itself!) Haman's plan also tells us that, while the Jews may have been politically insignificant at this time, they apparently had some economic and financial prominence, and that fact may have led to some of Haman's resentment.

10,000 talents would have been about two thirds of the entire empire's income according to Herodotus, leading some to believe that Haman was exaggerating, perhaps intentionally to better sway the king. The booty that Alexander the Great brought to the treasury at Susa was 49,000 talents of gold and silver, which would be at least five times the value of Haman's offer.

By giving Haman the signet ring in verse 10, the king was giving Haman unlimited authority to do whatever he wanted regarding this issue. Neither the King nor Haman appears to have had any idea that Queen Esther herself was a member of this troublesome group.

Notice that Haman here never once mentions the Jewish race by name in his argument before the king but instead refers to them only as a "certain people."

Perhaps that was because Xerxes' two predecessors, Cyrus and Darius, had issued proclamations favorable to the Jews.

In any event, you would think the king would ask – but he does not.

Some surmise that Xerxes may have been looking for a scapegoat to blame for his loss in Greece, and if so it would not be the last time God's people found themselves in that position. Nero later used the church as a scapegoat for the devastating fire that many believed he himself started. And as times turn bad today, we might wonder if history might not repeat itself. Are Christians to blame for all the troubles we face today - some are already saying so!

And in verse 11, Haman hears what must have been music to his ears – “the silver is given to thee.”

Haman gets the financing he needs for his plan, although the king certainly expected his promised 10,000 talents in return.

Later in 7:4, Esther will confirm that her people had been sold. It would not be the last time that God's people would be sold. Those 30 pieces of silver have changed hands many times.

The king's permission in verse 11 to Haman that he “do with them as it seems good to you,” is paralleled by a similar phrase later in 9:5 that the Jews “did what they would unto those that hated them,” but by that time the tables will have been turned!

One commentary has this to say about verse 11:

“More than one commentator has rightly expressed great doubt that a Persian king would so blithely hand over an entire nation within his empire for destruction.”

Really? Has there been any modern day example of a ruler blithely handing over an entire nation within his empire for destruction? Can we think of anyone who did such a thing to the Jews in our own recent history? Anyone come to mind? Can we perhaps think of an example where the Jews had little political power but great economic power? Can we think of an example where their goods were plundered by the one who was devoted to their destruction? Or is all of that just too bizarre to be true as that commentator believes?

LESSON 22

Esther 3:12-15

12 Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring. 13 And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey. 14 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day. 15 The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.

Verse 12 tells us this discussion with the king was happening on the 13th day of the first month, and verse 13 tells us that the 13th day of the 12th month was the date of destruction for the Jews. Again, the most likely use of the lots we saw earlier had been to choose that particular day and that particular month for the attack against the Jews.

If we are looking for God in this book, then perhaps we get a glimpse in the month and day chosen for the Jews' destruction. The 12th month would have been the latest possible month that the lot could have chosen, and the thirteenth day was considered an unlucky one by both the Babylonians and Persians.

Are we seeing a random toss of the dice, or are we seeing the hand of God? The text does not tell us. But perhaps we should recall Proverbs 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.”

Although Haman will have to wait 11 months for the day on which he will attack the Jews, he immediately sends out the decree announcing their fate.

This decree would likely have caused many Jews to run for their lives, leaving their property behind - both relieving Haman of their presence (as he wanted) and allowing Haman to confiscate their abandoned property (as he also wanted).

This edict calling for the destruction of the Jews is sent out on the 13th day of the first month, which is ironically the eve of the Passover (Numbers 28:16) - the day before the Jews would celebrate their freedom from Egyptian bondage.

But there is no mention of the Passover anywhere in this book. Did the Jews even remember it? Did they celebrate it? Esther almost certainly did not, at least not openly.

The decree is made and copies are sent to every province.

Chapter 3 ends with what one commentator has called the most horrifying sight in the narrative so far – after the death document had been issued, “the king and Haman sat down to drink.” The next time that Haman sits down to drink with the king it will be at a feast prepared by Queen Esther.

It is interesting that verse 15 says “the city of Susa was perplexed.” Everyone seems to have been bewildered by such an order, whether Jewish or not. Perhaps they wisely thought that if it happened to the Jews, it could also happen to us. And if other Jews had been living like Queen Esther, then perhaps the people were wondering who these Jews were! Did they know any Jews?

In Chapter 1, the disobedience to the king by one woman, Queen Vashti, brought about an edict for all women in the land. Now, in Chapter 3, the disobedience to the king by one man, Mordecai, brings an edict against all Jews in the land. There is an interesting parallel there to the situation of all mankind.

Romans 5:18 – Therefore as by the offence of one (Adam) judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.

We have noted that Esther has always been very meaningful to the Jews, particularly during times of persecution. But Esther has also always been very meaningful to the church for the same reason.

And the church has also faced a threat of extinction by a foreign power. We see that, for example, in the conflict between the church and Rome in the first century.

The Roman emperors ordered all people to acknowledge them as Lord. When the Christians refused, they were persecuted. The early Christians, like the Jews in Susa, had their existence threatened by the government under which they lived. And that situation has been repeated throughout history.

We can turn to Esther for comfort that God loves his people and will protect and preserve his people. And we can turn to Revelation to see the simple theme of that book - we win! Despite the power and might of Rome, we win! And that is true no matter who takes the place of Rome in our own day and time.

Daniel and Revelation and Esther have the same central theme - we win!

But does “winning” mean we won’t face persecution and death in this life? No. In fact the opposite is true - winning **may** require that we do face death and persecution in this life. We may be physically delivered (as with Daniel and Esther) or we may not (as with the first century martyrs).

Revelation 2:10 - Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: **be thou faithful unto death**, and I will give thee a crown of life.

1 John 5:4 - For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: **and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.**

Romans 8:31-39 - What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay any thing to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? **shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.** For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the message of Daniel. That is the message of Revelation. And that is the message of Esther.

Esther 4:1-3

When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry; 2 And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth. 3 And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Mordecai shows intense grief over the edict, and no doubt particularly because his personal conflict with Haman has brought the entire Jewish nation into jeopardy. It is one thing to bring persecution upon yourself, but he had brought it upon his entire people by his refusal to show respect to Haman.

Was Mordecai now regretting his failure to honor Haman?

There is no indication here that Mordecai regretted having not bowed down to Haman, which some say supports the idea that it was done for religious reasons. (But since we are not told what Mordecai was thinking, we can't say for sure whether he had any regret.) And perhaps if Mordecai had bowed down to Haman, then Haman would have just found some other reason to

move against the Jews. This ethnic hatred seems to have run both ways, and is usually the case with ethnic hatred.

We see the tearing of clothes as a display of grief by Jews throughout the Old Testament by such men as Joshua, Caleb, David, and Ezra, but the tearing of clothes was also a custom of the Persians. Herodotus says that the Persians under Xerxes tore their clothes because of their grief at having lost the battle of Salamis.

Mordecai went up to, but did not enter, the King's Gate because no one in sackcloth was allowed to enter.

Mordecai's mourning was duplicated by Jews wherever the decree reached – and they, of course, unlike Mordecai had no way to know what had caused the edict. In fact, Mordecai may have been the only Jew who knew what had triggered the edict. The others were no doubt shocked by this edict against them seemingly coming out of the blue. Did Mordecai explain it to anyone, or did he act like he was just as perplexed as they were?

In verse 2, we see great mourning; we see fasting; we see weeping; we see wailing; and we see sackcloth and ashes. What don't we see anywhere in verse 2? We don't see any mention of prayer.

As we have said, the book of Esther omits direct references to God perhaps in order to highlight God's providence at work behind the scenes.

“The promise of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of his name obscures nothing of his identity, attributes, and purposes for his chosen people and for the entire world of mankind.”

But another possibility is that these exiled Jews had moved so far away from God that they did not even pray to God in this hour of crisis.

These verses are the low point in the narrative. Death seems certain – unless a deliverer can be found. But who could that be? We know the answer when

it comes to our own deliverance. Verse 4 answers that question for the deliverance at issue here, and we will soon see a great reversal.

Esther 4:4-5

4 So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received it not. 5 Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.

We have mentioned that Esther was hiding her identity as a Jew, but her maids and chamberlains may have known her identity. They told her about the edict, and then perhaps they witnessed her reaction. And one of them carried the clothing she sent to Mordecai.

Another possibility is that the servants were not bringing news specifically because they knew of Esther's relationship with Mordecai, but were merely reporting the latest court gossip. It could have been quite an object of interest that one of the court officials was at the king's gate dressed in sackcloth, weeping and wailing. Perhaps the only one who knew the relationship was the trusted servant who carried her messages to Mordecai.

Esther was deeply distressed when she learned of Mordecai's grief. She and Mordecai seem to have still been very close, although they also seem to have carefully maintained the secrecy of their relationship.

In verse 4, Esther wants Mordecai to change his clothes.

In the book of Esther, changes of clothing often reflect a change in circumstances. For example:

- The Jews are clothed in sackcloth to signify their mourning (4:3).
- Esther puts on her royal robes before going to Xerxes, reminding him of her status as queen (5:1).

- Haman seeks to be clothed in royal robes as a sign of his own desire for honor (6:8-9).
- Mordecai is clothed in royal robes because the king wishes to honor him (6:10-11).
- Mordecai is clothed in royal robes to signify his promotion to vizier (8:10).

Today, we also change our clothes to represent a change in our circumstances.

Galatians 3:27 – “For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

The phrase “to know” in verse 5 is important.

There is a contrast running throughout this book between those who know and those who do not know.

- The king does not know all that Haman is up to with the Jews.
- Esther does not know why Mordecai is so upset.
- Haman will not know why Esther has invited him to a feast.

In each case, the knowledge is a life-and-death matter. I say that is a contrast running throughout Esther, but we shouldn't limit it just to Esther. Isn't it a contrast that runs throughout the Bible - a distinction between those who know and those who do not know when it comes to a life and death matter?

Hosea 4:6 – My people are destroyed for lack of **knowledge**: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee.

2 Thessalonians 1:8 – In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that **know not** God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What we don't know can kill us. We should thank God every day that he has revealed to us what we need to know to be saved. And we need to proclaim that knowledge to all who will hear it.

Esther 4:6-8

6 So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate. 7 And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them. 8 Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

The city square of Susa has been excavated by archaeologists. These locations often served as markets and public meeting places in ancient times. It would have been a very crowded, bustling location. Mordecai and Hatach could have met in such a place without drawing any attention to themselves.

Mordecai was well informed, knowing even the details of the money that Haman offered the king. The text emphasizes that he knew the exact sum. Mordecai even sent Esther a copy of the decree so she could see for herself and know that he was not exaggerating.

Verse 7 may suggest that Mordecai told Esther what had caused the decree to be issued, but we are not certain that he did.

Mordecai also instructed the eunuch to "charge" Esther to go to the king and plead with him on behalf of "her" people.

And there in verse 8 we have the central question for Queen Esther in this book that bears her name - **who were "her" people?**

Was Esther Jewish or was Esther Persian? And if she had one foot in each camp, into which camp would she now jump when forced to make a decision?

And if Esther did what Mordecai commanded, then her secret would be out! Wasn't Mordecai the same one who had earlier commanded her to keep her identity a secret? If Esther now obeyed Mordecai's new command to do the opposite, she might find herself on the wrong side of this terrible edict! Revealing her identity as a Jew would make her an easy target in the

treacherous Persian court. Many, no doubt, (perhaps including Vashti!) were looking for a way to get Esther out of the picture. This fact, if revealed, would give them a huge opening to do just that.

How would Esther respond? Esther had to decide who she was – was she Esther or was she Hadassah? Who were “her” people?

When we studied Daniel, we talked about “Daniel moments.” A “Daniel moment” is a moment when we are given an opportunity to stand up and let the entire world know whose side we are on. Esther is having a Daniel moment here, or perhaps we should now call it an Esther moment!

We need to pray that we, too, will be given such Daniel or Esther moments! Every Christian has had at least one Esther moment because that is the choice demanded by the gospel, and that is the choice we declared to the world when we made the good confession. That choice to identify ourselves with the people of God defines who we are. That choice answers the question: **who are my people?**

I need to ask myself that question, as do you. Who are my people? If someone were to examine my life by watching everything I do, everything I say, and even everything I think – how would that person answer the question? Who would that person see as my people? The people of the world, or the people of God? But, of course, someone is watching everything I do, say, and think! We have no secrets before our creator.

2 Timothy 2:19 - Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, **The Lord knoweth them that are his.** And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

Esther moments will come again and again throughout our lives. Often they will come unexpectedly and they will pass quickly – but we should pray that they will come, that we will recognize them when they come, and that we will respond correctly when they come. It is those Esther moments in our lives that define who we are. When an Esther moment comes in my life, do I stand up, or do I keep my seat?

Esther 4:9-11

9 And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai. 10 Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai; 11 All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

Esther's response to Mordecai in verse 11 seems a little condescending. As one commentary noted, "When finally Esther opens her mouth, we discover that there is some defiance in her soul."

What Esther says is: "Every servant of the king, and even the common people, know this is the rule." The implication, of course, is that Mordecai knows the rule, as well. He should be aware that he is demanding that his adopted daughter place her life in the hands of a king who has proven very willing to dispose of queens.

Esther reminds Mordecai of the Persian law forbidding anyone to approach the king without first being called. Under that law, such a person was to be killed unless the king held out his golden scepter. Esther had not been called for 30 days.

Herodotus confirms that the Persians had such a law, but he also says that one could send a message to the king requesting an audience. If so, why didn't Esther do that? Perhaps because it would take too long, or perhaps the risk was too great that he would say no – and then what? An irrevocable no is a difficult thing to get around!

Under ordinary circumstances, Esther might have had less fear in approaching the king unannounced, but this decree changed things. Clearly, something had caused the king to issue the decree – and perhaps Esther's secret was already out.

Remember that these events were taking place five years after Esther's initial encounter with the king. That he had not called for her in 30 days may suggest that his affection for Esther had cooled. Perhaps the king was ready for another queen, and, if so, perhaps the king would welcome an opportunity to have Esther banished or killed. Is this what Esther was thinking? We are not told.

Esther 4:12-14

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Mordecai's only recorded words appear in these verses, and they leave us with a number of intriguing questions. For example, from where or from whom would this other deliverance come if Esther failed to act?

When Mordecai discusses the dangerous situation with Esther he refers to it simply as "**such a time as this.**"

That almost sounds as if Mordecai is just an innocent bystander and played no role in leading his people to just such a time as this! "Well, how did this happen?" It happened, Mordecai, because you went out of your way to repeatedly insult the **second** most powerful person in the Persian empire, and, in doing so, you repeatedly disobeyed the express command of the **first** most powerful person in the Persian empire!

We may not be sure what sort of person Mordecai is, but we are certain that he is not an innocent bystander! God's people might never have been in danger at all had Mordecai not acted as he did. And notice how Mordecai heaps the guilt on poor Esther after it was Mordecai himself who had created this problem!

Am I saying Mordecai was a bad guy? No. I'm saying we can't be entirely sure what sort of person Mordecai was. He certainly got Esther to act, but was his motive just self-preservation, or did Mordecai recognize something much bigger than himself was at stake? God knew that – did Mordecai know that?

In countless lessons and sermons, we have often supplied motives for Esther and Mordecai that are not given in the text. Perhaps we have been right all along, and Mordecai and Esther are heroes throughout, but perhaps we have not been right about them. Yes, Mordecai ends up on top of things at the end of the book – but is Mordecai on top of things with God or just on top of things with Xerxes?

I think there is an important lesson here for us. Esther and Mordecai are not the only people for whom we have often supplied motives. We do that all the time!

Someone does or says something we don't like, and we immediately supply all sorts of motives and thoughts directed personally at us – most often without any evidence. Yes, we can see what people do and we can hear what people say, and we can make certain judgments from that evidence, but we do not know what they are thinking. And when we act as if we do, we are putting ourselves in the place of God.

John 7:24 – Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

Jeremiah 17:10 – I the LORD search the heart.

Revelation 2:23 – I am he who searches mind and heart.

The next time we find ourselves acting as if we can search someone's mind and heart, we need to pause and consider Revelation 2:23. That is something Jesus does, not something we do.

1 Corinthians 2:11 – For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him?

The “time such as this” in verse 14 had come upon them because of Mordecai’s disobedience to King Xerxes. And remember that Esther’s current position came about because of Vashti’s disobedience to King Xerxes. Esther herself is about to appear before the king unbidden. For such a powerful king, Xerxes seems to have had trouble getting people to do what he wants them to do!

Mordecai tells Esther that she is in danger no matter what she does. She is in danger if she acts, and she is in danger if she fails to act.

Why was Mordecai so certain that Esther would perish if she failed to act? After all, her identity remained a secret among the Persians.

Mordecai’s statement to Esther is a little unsettling when we consider it closely. Mordecai understands that Esther’s life may be in peril if she acts, but Mordecai is certain Esther will perish if she fails to act.

Was Mordecai invoking a divine judgment upon her if she failed to act for her people? Or was Mordecai, as some suggest, threatening to reveal Esther’s identity as Jew if she failed to act. How did Esther understand Mordecai’s statement? Did she see a veiled threat? We are not told.

Another, perhaps more likely, explanation is that Mordecai may just have felt certain that Esther’s secret would not be a secret for very long.

Verse 16 suggests that other Jews knew who Esther was, and her servants may also have known, with at least one of them (the courier she sent to Mordecai) almost certainly knowing. Once the killing started, the other Jews who knew Esther would likely turn to Esther for help. And so Esther could not avoid danger by remaining silent. (Yet another lesson for us!)

LESSON 23

Esther 4:12-14, Continued

12 And they told to Mordecai Esther's words. 13 Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. 14 For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Who is the other deliverer in verse 14 whom Mordecai believes will arise if Esther decides not to act?

Some commentators think Mordecai was talking about some other person stepping in to save the Jews should Esther choose not to act, and they suggest that Mordecai was not thinking about God either with regard to Esther or with regard to this other unnamed person. And, again, we don't know what Mordecai was thinking, but I think even so we can say, based on the facts we have been given, that Mordecai was talking in verse 14 about a deliverance by God.

"Given the facts of the story that the narrator has emphasized, such as the character of the king, the power of Haman's position, the diabolical nature of his edict, and the irrevocability of Persian law, a plausible source for another human agency that could deliver the Jews is hard to imagine."

Commentators have long seen in verse 14 an allusion to God's intervention should human efforts fail. But is that really the choice the Jews were facing – that either man would save the Jews or God would save the Jews?

Don't we see God already acting to save his people? Don't we see God already working through Esther? I don't think Mordecai was saying either you do it or God will do it. I think that a better view is that Mordecai was saying either God will do it **through you**, Esther, or God will do it **through someone else**.

And at last at the end of verse 14 we come to the most famous question in the book of Esther: “Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

Mordecai suggests that there is a purpose behind all that has happened in Esther’s life – a purpose that goes beyond her own self interests (and beyond Mordecai’s own self interests, although that part is not as clear in his famous speech).

If Esther had ever wondered how she had come to this unlikely position, perhaps that question had now been answered. Why had Esther found herself in Persia? Why had Esther found herself in Susa? Why had Esther found herself in the bedroom of King Xerxes?

We, too, may look around at times and wonder how we have reached our current state. Why am I living where I am? Why am I working where I am?

I once heard a preacher at another congregation say, and I am quoting now, “God does not care where you live or what you do for a living.” Is this the same God who knows when a sparrow falls? Is this the same God who counts the hairs on our heads? God cares.

And one reason God cares is found in the question here in verse 14. We are not living here just for ourselves. We do not work just for ourselves. Everything we do should have the bigger picture in mind. We should view everything we do with the eye of eternity. And when we do that, we will find that what we do is suddenly filled with much more meaning and significance. If you are ever tempted to feel that your life lacks meaning or significance, the cure for that is to lift up your eyes. Esther is being asked to do that here.

Mordecai’s question **seems** to reveal a deep conviction of God’s providence, and an understanding that God’s providence works through the actions of individuals. Yes, God would save his people – but he would do so through the courage and faithfulness of Esther, or he would find someone else.

Could God have sent an army of angels to kill the Persians? Yes, but that is not how God worked then, and that is not how God works now. We are God's army – and if we lay our weapons down and fail to act, then who will fight for him? If the soldiers of Christ fail to arise, who will arise in their place? If we remain silent, who will speak up?

God is working today through his people, and we are his people. And if we don't work, what then? God will do what he had always done – God will find a faithful remnant and work through them. That is what God is doing today – and we are that faithful remnant.

Why did I say earlier that Mordecai's statements **seem** to reveal a conviction of God's providence? Because we don't know for sure what Mordecai is thinking, and because there is another way to understand his statement.

The original Hebrew would support this reading: "Will relief and deliverance come to the Jews from another place?" That reading would change Mordecai's statement from an expression of trust to one of despair. If Esther fails to act, then there will be no one left to act. Esther is their final hope.

Which view is correct? We can't say for sure, but I favor the traditional view. No matter how secularized Mordecai may have become, I think we see at least a glimmer of faith in Mordecai's statement here to Esther – and perhaps much more than just a glimmer.

Finally, some point to these verses as evidence that Mordecai believed the Jewish race to be indestructible. That the Jewish race could never and would never perish. There was certainly some truth to that belief at this point in history. Why? Because God had promised to bless the entire world through a son of David, and that worldwide blessing had not yet come. God needed at least a remnant of faithful Jews living in Jerusalem in the first century to fulfill his promises to Abraham and to King David.

But there was also great danger in the notion of Jewish indestructibility. Why? Because it led to false confidence.

During the days of Jeremiah, the Judeans believed that Jerusalem could not be destroyed because of the presence of the temple in the city (Jeremiah 7:1-15). As the people soon learned, God was willing to destroy the city and the temple and to reduce the nation to a small remnant to correct their sinful ways.

Jesus warned the Jewish people that they should take no comfort in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham because “God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). God does have a covenant relationship with his people, but that relationship is spiritual rather than genetic.

Romans 2:28-29 – For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: 29 But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

There has never been a time in human history when those opposed to God and in rebellion against God did, at the same time, enjoy a right relationship with God. God’s covenant people have always been God’s faithful people. That was certainly the case under the Old Covenant.

Deuteronomy 7:9 – Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations.

God’s covenant people have always been God’s faithful people. That is true today, that was true in Esther’s day, and it has always been true.

Esther 4:15-17

15 Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer, 16 Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. 17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

We see a great reversal in verses 15-17. In verse 8, Mordecai issued his final command to Esther through the king’s eunuch, but here in verse 17 Mordecai does what Esther commands him to do.

The word “commanded” in verse 17 does not just mean “instructed” as the NIV translates it or “told” as other versions translate it. The verb used in verse 17 is the same word used in Esther 2:10 for Mordecai’s commands to Esther, the same word used in 3:2 for the king’s commandment regarding Haman, and the same word used in 3:12 for Haman’s commandment. Esther is “commanding” Mordecai. No softer word should be used here instead.

Esther has now taken charge. So far she has been passive, not taking action, but instead just seemingly following the path of least resistance. But now Esther has come to a defining moment, and **passive** Esther has become **active** Esther.

It is Esther, not Mordecai, who courageously goes before the king.

It is Esther, not Mordecai, who plans the strategy to unmask Haman.

It is Esther, not Mordecai, who prevents the genocide of her people.

Mordecai created the problem. Esther solves the problem.

This great reversal in the life of Esther will lead to a great reversal in the life of Esther’s people – and at this point she has perhaps finally answered Mordecai’s unstated question – who are your people? The Jews – not the Persians – are “her” people.

What caused this great transformation in the life of Esther? When did it occur?

We talked earlier about “Esther moments” – those moments of decision in which we are given an opportunity to stand up with the people of God and let our identity be known. Again, we should pray for those moments and welcome them when they come. And one thing about those moments is that, when we respond correctly to them, they have the effect of strengthening us and emboldening us for other such moments. Standing up for God the second time is easier than standing up for God the first time.

Isn't that what we see in the life of Esther? She became a different person once she stood up and (eventually) identified herself with the people of God. That was when the great reversal in her own life began. That decision was the pivot point in her life.

It is often an imagined parade of horrors that prevents us from standing up when we should – and if that parade does not appear after we take a stand, subsequent stands become easier. And once we are identified with the people of God, we will become bolder and more confident about later stands.

Romans 8:31 - If God be for us, who can be against us?

Matthew 10:28 - And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Esther is the central character in this book. How do we know that? (And it is not only because the book is named for her!)

We also know it because, for the most part, Esther is the only person in this book who changes. Mordecai, Xerxes, and Haman walk through all or most of this book unchanged and unchanging, but not Esther. The text is calling for us to focus on Esther as she progresses and matures through these events.

And perhaps the text is inviting readers to compare Esther's development with our own. Are we progressing and maturing? Or are we walking through life unchanged and unchanging like others in this book?

Christians need to be in a constant state of change! It is Jesus – not us – who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. We should be changing every day as we become more and more like Christ. Or instead do we perhaps expect Jesus to become more and more like us?

Another question - do we see Esther acting by faith in these verses or do we see Esther following the fatalism of the Persians?

We are not told, although the end of verse 16 perhaps shows us some Persian fatalism – “if I perish, I perish.”

Is that fatalism, or does it simply show us Esther's courageous determination? As usual, the text does not tell us what Esther is thinking or what is motivating her. Each time we think we finally have Esther all figured out, the text tosses us another puzzle.

We have noticed quite a few comparisons between what happened to Esther and what happened to Joseph, and Esther's statement in verse 16 ("if I perish, I perish") shows us yet another similarity. In Genesis 43:14, when Jacob was forced by circumstances to send Benjamin back to Egypt, he said, "If I am bereaved, I am bereaved."

In verse 16, Esther commands the Jews in Susa to fast for three days, and she says that she and her maidens will do the same. We remember the beauty treatments that Esther received before she went before the king the first time. Here she will go before the king after a three day fast.

Esther's command that the people fast on her behalf may imply prayer, but the text does not mention it. Although fasts were generally practiced only during the day, this fast lasted both day and night. And, although we see fasting throughout the Bible, the Jews were commanded to fast on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. But they frequently fasted at other times for special occasions or times of special need.

The act of fasting generally implies an appeal to God in the Bible, but the text does not mention God. Fasting can also simply imply a time of mourning, and perhaps that is all it means here.

What would Esther do next? So far we have seen two acts of either courage or foolhardiness – Vashti in refusing to appear before the king, and Mordecai in refusing to honor Haman. Will we see a third?

And will it be courage we see or foolhardiness? I think we can now say with confidence that with Esther it will be courage. God's providence has brought Esther to this point. How will she respond?

Esther 5:1-4

Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the gate of the house. 2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favour in his sight: and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre. 3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom. 4 And Esther answered, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

In Chapter 1, Vashti risked her life by refusing to appear before the king when summoned. Here, Esther risks her life by doing the opposite – appearing before the king without being summoned.

There is a sharp contrast between Esther's first encounter with Xerxes and her encounter here with Xerxes five years later.

- (1) The first time, Esther had spent a whole year in beautification; every possible action was taken to make her as attractive as she could be. This time, she comes in exhausted from a fast of three days.
- (2) Previously, Esther was brought passively before the king, accepting the role into which she had been cast. This time, she initiates the encounter, hoping to change her fate and that of her people.
- (3) In their first meeting, Esther was segregated from her people and was hiding her identification with them. This time Esther goes – secretly, at first – but as the representative of her people.
- (4) Before, Esther was the passive recipient of the clothes that she wore before the king. This time, Esther clothes herself in her royal apparel before making her appearance. Esther appears now as the queen.

There is also a strong contrast between this event and what happened with Vashti in Chapter 1. Both queens have violated the law, but the circumstances are oddly inverted.

- (1) Vashti had risked her life by refusing to come before the king when she was summoned. Esther now risks her life by coming before the king without being summoned.
- (2) Vashti's failure to appear incited the king's wrath; Esther's unexpected appearance elicits his favor.
- (3) Vashti's insubordination will result in an attempt to put all women in their place; Esther's insubordination, if successful, will result in the deliverance of all the Jews.

Remember that Vashti was publicly deposed so that no other woman would ever refuse to obey their husbands but rather that they would know their place. Esther is now stepping out of her place to go before the king in disobedience to the rule about who could approach him.

You should put a circle around two very important words in verse 1 – “and stood.” Esther took a stand.

We mentioned Martin Luther in a previous class when we discussed his anti-Semitism, but Luther also had some positive qualities. In April 1521, Luther appeared before Emperor Charles V to defend what he had taught and written. At the end of his speech, he reportedly spoke the famous words, “Here I stand; I can do no other. God help me.”

Everyone knew where Luther stood. Where do we stand? We need to ask ourselves that question every day, and we need to make sure that we never cause the world to doubt where we stand.

The threat to Esther's life in approaching the king unrequested has been confirmed outside the Bible. Archaeologists have uncovered an image of a Persian king (either Xerxes or Darius) seated upon his throne and holding a long scepter in his right hand. Behind him is shown a soldier holding a large ax. Either the scepter would rise or the ax would fall.

Xerxes' offer to Esther of half his kingdom was likely a figure of speech that was not intended to be taken literally. It simply meant that the king was disposed to be very generous to the person in question, in this case Esther.

Herodotus tells us about two other occasions when Xerxes made such an offer – and each time he ended up regretting it. He made that same “half kingdom” offer to one of his intended mistresses. She requested the beautiful robe he was wearing that had been handwoven by his wife, Amestris, who then discovered the affair and sought revenge. She gained it when, on her birthday she was also granted such a “half kingdom” request and she asked for the mother of the intended mistress (whom she believed was behind the affair). She then had that woman brutally mutilated, which led the woman’s husband, Xerxes’ brother, to start a revolt against the king. Xerxes does not seem to have learned very much from those earlier events!

Two more things to note about the “half kingdom” offer in verse 3: First, it is yet another example of the historical accuracy of this book. Herodotus confirms that Xerxes made such offers on more than one occasion, and here we see him making the same offer to Esther.

Second, we have said that there are no references to Esther elsewhere in the Bible, but we might pause here to consider whether Mark 6:23 is such a reference. That is where Herod Antipas (the son of Herod the Great) promised the daughter of Herodias, “Whatever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom,” which led to the death of John the Baptist. Why did Herod say that? After all, Herod was only a tetrarch operating under the thumb of Rome and had no kingdom that he could give away. Some commentators suggest that Herod was quoting Xerxes from the book of Esther, which, if true, would mean that the only reference to Esther in the Bible outside of the book of Esther itself came from the lips of Herod Antipas!

In verse 2, the king raises his scepter, and Esther’s life is spared. All of the worry and all of the fear had been for nothing – the king was pleased with her, and he granted her an audience.

The king was very curious about what had caused Esther to come before him unrequested. He knew it must be something extremely important because he knew she was risking death in coming to him that way.

But Esther has learned a lot in her five years as queen, and she handles the situation as a master politician – she does not directly answer the king’s question. Instead, she invites the king, along with Haman, to come to a banquet that she has prepared. That she extended the offer to include Haman only added to the mystery. It was an unusual honor for another man to be invited to a banquet with the queen because Persian kings were very protective of their wives (as Haman will soon be reminded!).

One thing we know for certain about Esther is that she was clever. She knew she would not have the upper hand if she confronted Haman in front of the king in his throne room with all of his advisors in attendance. She knew the king would see it as an affront to his authority. So instead she moved the conversation to a place and time of her own choosing. Here, in the throne room, Haman, who belonged there, would have had the upper hand over Esther, who did not belong there.

In verse 4, the initial Hebrew letters in the phrase “Let the King ... come today” spell out the divine name, Yahweh (YHWH). (Most English translations say “let the King and Haman come today,” but the verb is singular. A better translation might be, “let the King come today – and Haman.”) Some ancient manuscripts wrote those letters in large script to call attention to that fact that they spell out the divine name, with some arguing that the author had included God’s name in coded form.

As shown on the handout, YHWH can be found four times in Esther:

- In 1:20, the reversed name is formed by initial letters.
- In 5:4, the forward name is formed by initial letters.
- In 5:13, the reversed name is formed by final letters.
- In 7:7, the forward name is formed by final letters.

Why are some reversed (keeping in mind that the Hebrew is reversed to start with!)? Some suggest it is because reversal is the key theme of the book.

What can we conclude about all of this? In my opinion, it is just a coincidence, but we have already discussed how the many seeming coincidences in this book are used to show us the providence of God! So who knows?

I am always amused by those who seek secret codes in the Bible – they generally ignore what God is plainly saying to them in his word while they seek secret hidden messages from God. Today, there is an entire industry built around supposed secret Bible codes, and those efforts display an ignorance of scripture as well as an ignorance of statistics. The Bible does have a message for them – but they don't need a secret decoder ring to find it!

Verse 4 ends with Haman being invited to his own hanging – and looking forward to it! If Haman weren't so despicable, we would be tempted to feel sorry for him!

LESSON 24

Esther 5:5-8

5 Then the king said, Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared. 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed. 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is; 8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.

At the banquet, and after some drinks, the king again asks Esther what caused her to come before him unannounced – and once again he is understandably curious why she had risked death in doing so. But once again, Esther sidesteps the question, instead inviting them both to another banquet on the next day.

The king is so curious that, as we will see in a moment, he cannot sleep (which turns out to be very important). Haman, on the other hand, doesn't seem curious at all – he is just glad to be there! He seems to have been completely blinded by his pride.

Why did Esther make the king wait for an answer? We don't know. It was certainly a risk because the king's agreeable mood could have changed quickly – Esther knew he was very moody and erratic, and Haman could be tipped off at any moment to the danger that he was in.

Esther's answer suggests she was treating the king's promise as sort of a blank check that she could take with her – "I will do to morrow as the king hath said." Why did Esther make the king wait?

Esther is clever in how she words the request: "if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet." She conditions the king's arrival at the second banquet on his

willingness to grant her, as yet unrevealed, petition. If the king shows up, he has essentially agreed in advance to grant her petition.

Esther is also clever in how she again loops Haman into the second banquet. For the first banquet, Esther said (verse 4) “let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for **him**” but for the second banquet she said (verse 8) “let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for **them**.” I think Esther has thought of a plan, and Haman’s presence is required for the plan to work!

For whatever reason, the time was not right at the first banquet, and so Esther wisely showed patience along with courage – two qualities that do not always go hand in hand.

We do know that the king had a sleepless night, likely because of this first encounter, and we know that sleepless night would later prove very important. We see God working here through Esther’s unexplained delay to see his plans accomplished.

There is a difficult translation issue in verse 7. That verse ends with the phrase “my petition and my request is,” but the next verse does not contain her petition. Her petition in response to the offer of half a kingdom is not that they come to another banquet, but rather is the request that Xerxes spare her people – a petition that is not made in verse 8. So why does verse 7 say “my petition is?”

The answer is that verse 7 does not say that, at least not in the original language. The verb “is” has been supplied by the translators. Esther’s words in 5:7 are an incomplete thought. Esther begins to respond to the king, but she breaks off her answer. At the moment when the reader thinks Esther is about to save her people, she pauses and stops mid-sentence. A more accurate translation reads: “Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request... (LONG DRAMATIC PAUSE) If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request,

let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to morrow as the king hath said.”

Why does Esther begin this way, then suddenly break off? That is precisely the question the book wants us to ask ourselves. Is Esther afraid? Is she having second thoughts? Is the old Esther, the timid wallflower, reasserting herself? It might seem that Esther has tricked us, building up our expectations, then disappointing us.

Most likely, for whatever reason, Esther just knew that this was not yet the right time to make her request known to the king. The perfect time to do that would come soon, but this was not it.

Who is Esther and who are her people? Although it looked like those questions were about to be finally answered in the throne room and then again at this first banquet, those questions still remain unanswered in verse 8.

The king, no doubt, is very curious. How is Haman feeling? Verse 9 will tell us.

Esther 5:9-14

9 Then went Haman forth that day joyful and with a glad heart: but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he stood not up, nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless Haman refrained himself: and when he came home, he sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife. 11 And Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king. 12 Haman said moreover, Yea, Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king. 13 Yet all this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate. 14 Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and to morrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet. And the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.

Verse 9 tells us that Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. Again, unlike others in this book, we are told exactly how Haman is feeling. Everything seemed to be going Haman's way, and he is very happy.

Haman's defining characteristic in this book is his pride. We see his vast and tender ego on display all throughout this book. And once again Haman's pride meets Mordecai, and as usual, Mordecai does not disappoint.

Apparently, Haman had to pass by Mordecai on his way home, and Mordecai neither rose nor showed any fear when the great Haman passed by. Haman had been honored by the Queen – but this Jew refused to show him any honor! This was even more of an affront than when Mordecai earlier refused to bow down. A single dark cloud has completely ruined Haman's wonderful day.

And what about Mordecai? After placing the entire Jewish nation under a decree of death following his first insult of Haman, one might have thought that Mordecai might take some steps to avoid insulting Haman again - perhaps just be avoiding him if nothing else. But Mordecai has taken a stand - for something, we don't know for sure what - and so once again Mordecai insults the great Haman.

What does Haman do in response? Haman does the only reasonable thing open to him – he runs home and cries to his wife, Zeresh!

But verse 10 tells us that Haman first “refrained himself.” You can just picture Haman feigning indifference at the slight while seething and plotting revenge inside. But another likely reason for Haman's restraint here is that, as Chapter 6 will suggest, Haman needs the king's permission to take any action against Mordecai, who himself was an official of some sort.

In verse 10, Haman summons his wife. As Yogi Berra said, it's deja vu all over again!

This book began with the great king Xerxes summoning his own wife, and Queen Esther has just come before the king unsummoned. And now what is

Haman doing? He is summoning his wife! This time, the summoned wife apparently comes quickly.

Notice Haman's boast in verse 12 that "Esther the queen did let no man come in with the king unto the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and to morrow am I invited unto her also with the king."

Haman apparently has not paused for one moment to wonder why he was given such an unusual honor of being invited by the Queen to two banquets or what this all important (but still unknown) request by Queen Esther might entail. Esther had risked her life to tell the king about something that apparently involves Haman in some way. That fact would cause many to be a bit apprehensive - but not Haman!

Haman's focus is entirely on Haman! If Haman is being honored, then the only possible reason is that those honoring Haman have just suddenly discovered how wonderful Haman truly is! What other reason could there be? Nothing blinds a person more than pride – which is why pride is so dangerous.

But there is one person who does not think Haman is wonderful. And Haman complains to his wife that nothing – not even his riches, his power, or his honor from the Queen – gives him any satisfaction as long as he sees Mordecai sitting at the king's gate.

It has been rightly said that a person of good character overlooks slights against himself, but one of inferior character magnifies them. Here is how the philosopher Blaise Pascal described such a person:

"The same man who spends so many days and nights in fury and despair at losing some office or at some imaginary affront to his honor is the very one who knows that he is going to lose everything through death but feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest. It is an incomprehensible spell, a supernatural torpor."

We see such a person in Haman. He is obsessed with Mordecai's opinion of him, while giving hardly a thought to his own attempted genocide of an entire people.

Haman is propelled along by slights to his honor, whether real or imaginary. Haman's focus is on how others see him, and we see him giving no thought at all to what sort of person he really is.

Haman's focus is totally external – which makes it doubly interesting that Haman is the only person in Esther whose inner thoughts are laid open for our examination.

There is a very subtle irony in the picture of Haman running home to ask his wife how to solve his problem. Remember how this book started out? The king and his advisors were concerned that the Vashti incident would somehow undermine male leadership in their society! Who do we see taking charge in this book? Esther and Zeresh – Xerxes' wife and Haman's wife!

With Haman and his wife Zeresh, we see a parallel with King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. Like Haman, Ahab was rebuffed by Naboth and then ran home sulking to his wife – and like Jezebel, Zeresh has a simple yet evil solution to the problem. Like Haman, Ahab also seemingly had everything – and yet he wanted just one more thing to be happy.

Zeresh, like Jezebel, takes the lead in pushing Haman to do his evil deed. Notice that while Zeresh is listed last in verse 10, she is listed first in verse 14. Zeresh's advice is very bad advice – and yet Haman follows it eagerly. In a book that begins with the goal of keeping all women in their place, Haman's downfall is caused by two women – Queen Esther and his own wife, Zeresh.

Haman's wife proposes a public humiliation for Mordecai, so Haman builds a gallows that is 75 feet tall.

Critics have complained that no gallows would have been this tall – about the height of a 7-story building. But it is certainly not impossible, and it is also possible that it was built on top of a hill or a building. Haman wanted everyone

to see Mordecai – and Haman is about to get his wish, but not in the way he intended! Haman’s plans are about to run headfirst into the providence of God.

It is often said that Jesus can be found on every page of the Old Testament. Is that true of Esther?

Notice how Chapter 5 begins – “On the third day.” Can we not think of another, infinitely greater, champion of God’s people who arose to save them from certain death on the third day?

Whether the reference to the third day here has a greater significance, we don’t know, but many commentaries speculate that it does. In fact, commentaries have seen Esther herself as an anti-type of the church and Xerxes’ golden scepter as an anti-type of the gospel. Some have even compared the threatened impalement of Mordecai with the cross.

I think most of that speculation has gone much too far, and I agree with one commentator who cautioned that “the interpreter who resorts to typologies not explicitly spelled out in the New Testament is on treacherous ground.”

Esther 6

One commentator says that Esther Chapter 6 is “arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible” (although Chapter 7 seems funnier to me). But we should note what another commentator said: “The book of Esther may be wickedly funny at times, but it is also deadly serious.”

Esther 6:1-3

On that night could not the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles; and they were read before the king. 2 And it was found written, that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king’s chamberlains, the keepers of the door, who sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 3 And the king said, What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this? Then said the king’s servants that ministered unto him, There is nothing done for him.

While Haman plots Mordecai's death on a 75 foot gallows, the king plans to honor Mordecai for his faithful service.

Asking for the records of the chronicles to be read would be similar to asking today for the Congressional Record to be read – and each would likely provide a quick cure for insomnia.

Another possibility is that the king may have had a nagging feeling that he had forgotten to do something important – and perhaps he was hoping these records might refresh his recollection. Perhaps Esther's impending request had even created this nagging feeling in the king – what did she want? What had he forgotten? Had he forgotten their anniversary? Perhaps it seemed to the king that by her delay Esther was wanting him to come up with the answer on his own.

It was important for a Persian king to reward those who were loyal as a way of promoting his own safety and security on the throne. And so the king was understandably upset to learn that Mordecai had never been honored for foiling the assassination plot against him five years earlier. And, as we have said, Mordecai had likely been disappointed himself, possibly explaining his refusal to honor Haman.

And why did the king fail to honor Mordecai? Once again I think we see the hand of God at work. It was important for God's plan that Mordecai be honored at the right time. Perhaps we need to look for God's providence in our own lives when things do not operate according to our own carefully arranged time schedule.

The word "honor" in verse 3 occurs throughout the text. That word first appeared in 1:4 in reference to the honor of the king. In 1:20, the word was used to describe the honor that wives should give their husbands. It is the one thing that Haman craves, but so far that word has never been applied to him. Will Haman at last receive the honor he is due – or will he perhaps receive something else that he is due?

Esther 6:4-6

4 And the king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman was come into the outward court of the king's house, to speak unto the king to hang Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him. 5 And the king's servants said unto him, Behold, Haman standeth in the court. And the king said, Let him come in. 6 So Haman came in. And the king said unto him, What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour? Now Haman thought in his heart, To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?

The unsuspecting Haman enters the king's court, thinking the king must be planning to honor him – thinking to himself in verse 6, “Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?” “If ever there was a picture of pride going before a fall, Haman is it.” As one commentator noted, “Here the early bird is gotten by the worm!”

We begin to see here the series of seeming coincidences that we discussed in the introduction as Haman's plan spirals out of control.

The king just happens to have a sleepless night (although, as we have suggested, it might have been because of Esther's delay in answering his question). The king just happens to have the chronicles read to him, and the service of Mordecai just happens to come to his attention at the moment Haman is plotting Mordecai's death. Haman just happens to show up early and be there when the king asks for an advisor, and the king just happens to ask Haman for advice without initially mentioning Mordecai by name.

Those who read the book with the eye of faith cannot miss seeing God in its pages, even though he is never named. We cannot fail to see the hand of divine providence in such a series of events.

Haman is so eager to have his problem with Mordecai resolved that he arrives outside the king's bedroom the first thing in the morning. But the king also has a problem with Mordecai – he has failed to honor him as he should, and that failure could bring dishonor on the king himself! How will these two problems be resolved?

For starters, the king's problem comes first – Xerxes gives Haman no opportunity to present his problem before the king launches into his own problem.

As one commentator notes, the question in verse 6 “creates instant dismay in the reader: how unfortunate that the king should consult Haman, of all people, on the way to reward Mordecai!”

Haman, no doubt, would turn the king's opinion against Mordecai or perhaps suggest some meaningless and unobservable honor. But the king does not mention Mordecai's name when he asks the question, which allows Haman's pride to take center stage once again just at the right time.

And Haman asks himself a question in verse 6 that creates one of the funniest scenes in the Bible – “To whom would the king delight to do honour more than to myself?” Whom indeed! This peek into Haman's heart shows us a proud fool who is unable to imagine anyone more deserving of honor than himself.

Back in verse 3, the king asked, “What honour and dignity hath been done to Mordecai for this?” The word translated “dignity” in the KJV is better translated “advancement.” It is the same word we saw in 3:1 describing Haman: “After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.”

The question in verse 6 to Haman omits the word “advancement” from verse 3, but asks only how such a man would be honored by the king. Why is that omission important? Because had the king used the word “advancement” in his question to Haman, Haman would have immediately known the king was not speaking about him – because Haman could not be advanced any further! He was already second to the king being “above all the officials who were with him” (3:1).

The text here ironically reverses a scene that occurs several times in the Bible: someone presents a question or parable to a king or other authority, and after

the answer is given, it is revealed that the parable is about the person to whom the question was placed.

The best example of this is in 2 Samuel 12:1-12, where Nathan the prophet traps King David with the parable of the ewe lamb. Jesus often used this technique as well, presenting parables to the scribes and Pharisees that obliquely condemned them. You can almost see their faces as they slowly realized that Jesus was talking about them!

In Esther, however, it is the king who is questioning his “advisor,” not the advisor who questions the king. And it is not the king or the advisor who is the subject of the inquiry, but another party entirely. Unlike those accounts where the prophet or wise man is deliberately trapping the subject, here both Xerxes and Haman are unaware that a trap is being set. It is a case of the blind leading the blind. Neither can see what the other is doing.

Xerxes is not being clever, and Haman is not being clever. And yet clever things are happening. Who is behind it all?

Esther 6:7-10

7 And Haman answered the king, For the man whom the king delighteth to honour, 8 Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head: 9 And let this apparel and horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man withal whom the king delighteth to honour, and bring him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaim before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour. 10 Then the king said to Haman, Make haste, and take the apparel and the horse, as thou hast said, and do even so to Mordecai the Jew, that sitteth at the king's gate: let nothing fail of all that thou hast spoken.

English translations add the word “for” to the beginning of Haman’s answer in verse 7, but that word is not in the original Hebrew. Instead, Haman merely repeats the phrase “the man whom the king delightest to honor” as if he is simply enjoying the sound of those words. Haman will in fact repeat the phrase several times in his answer.

Haman does not even bother with the usual court formality, “If it please the king.” Haman is so caught up in the daydreams of his anticipated exaltation that he launches into his description without remembering whom he is addressing.

As we said, Haman can’t ask for a promotion for himself because he is already second only to the king. Haman selects a reward (wearing the king’s own robe and riding on the king’s own horse) that would reinforce his relation to the king in the eyes of the people. Today, it would be similar to the president allowing someone to use Air Force One.

This great honor has made Haman forget about Mordecai for a short time – a very short time! Haman wanted to be king for a day! (And most likely the text is asking us to infer that Haman wanted to be king for much longer than just a day. Remember that Xerxes would later be assassinated by his own advisors.)

Also, remember what we have said about the importance of putting on special clothing in Esther – here Haman wants to wear the king’s own robe.

Rather than asking for wealth or power, all of which Haman already had, Haman asks for honor and recognition – and here we see the driving force in Haman’s life: what do others think about him? Do they all know how wonderful he truly is?

Haman is guided throughout this book by one overriding concern – how will others see me. He wanted nothing more than that others would see him as powerful and prestigious. Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai’s motivations seem to come from inside – and the book tells us nothing about what they are thinking. Haman’s motivations, by contrast, are external – and the book tells us everything that is on his mind.

LESSON 25

Esther 6:7-10, Continued

Verse 8 includes an interesting detail – the horse would wear a royal crown. Haman could not ask to wear the crown himself, but he apparently thought the next best thing would be for the horse to wear the crown! Archaeologists have found carved reliefs showing Assyrian and Persian horses with crown-like ornaments on their heads. (See the class handout.)

As for whether Haman might have asked to wear the crown himself, we actually have an account by Plutarch of someone who made that very request of this same king:

And when Demaratus the Spartan, being bidden to ask a gift, asked that he might ride in state through Sardis, wearing his tiara upright after the manner of the Persian kings, Mithropaustes the King's cousin said, touching the tiara of Demaratus: 'This tiara of thine hath no brains to cover; indeed thou wilt not be Zeus merely because thou graspest the thunderbolt.' The King also repulsed Demaratus in anger at his request, and was minded to be inexorable towards him, and yet Themistocles begged and obtained a reconciliation with him.

And Haman, no doubt, he would have received the same reaction had he been foolish enough to make that request. It was much safer to let the horse wear the crown!

Haman was obsessed with kingship – in fact the Hebrew root word for “rule” appears six times in his answer to the king.

To fully appreciate verse 10, you have to picture Haman's face as the king finally identifies the one to whom this special honor will be given – none other than the despised Mordecai!

And to make things even funnier, Haman has no idea why the king would suddenly decide to honor this man whom Haman was planning to kill. Talk about a reversal! And the reversal was far from over for poor Haman!

Notice that the king does not just tell Haman to honor Mordecai, he tells Haman to honor “Mordecai **the Jew.**” In addition to rubbing salt in Haman’s wound, the reference by the king to Mordecai’s nationality raises an interesting question. Did the king even know that he had condemned all the Jews to death? Almost certainly not. Remember that Haman had never mentioned the Jews by name to the king when he convinced the king to sign the edict.

But that raises another question – how did King Xerxes know that Mordecai was a Jew?

We are not told, but perhaps Mordecai’s ancestry was recorded in the chronicles. Or perhaps the king had heard it from Mordecai himself or from another source. But, of course, unlike Esther, we are not told that Mordecai was keeping his background a secret. In fact, the reason why Esther’s relation to Mordecai was a secret was most likely because people already knew that Mordecai was a Jew. Haman certainly knew it!

We have said several times that the king never makes any decisions on his own, but the king does make one decision in verse 10.

When Haman told the king in verse 9 how to honor someone, Haman said that “one of the king’s most noble officials” should be selected to lead the horse around the city. In verse 10, the king selects Haman for that great honor! The king tells Haman to “do so to Mordecai the Jew!” That is, the king says to Haman, “That’s a great idea! You do it!” So Haman is not able to pick a subordinate to lead Mordecai around. He has to do it himself!

And what does Haman say in response? Not a word, as far as we are told. I suspect it took some time for the shock to wear off.

“By the king’s order, Haman cannot neglect any of the honors that he imagined himself enjoying. In fact, Xerxes reminds Haman twice that these are his words, his instructions, rather than those of the king. Haman’s silence is more articulate than any response he could have formulated.”

“Haman unwittingly prescribes the highest honors for his enemy and brings the greatest humiliation upon himself.”

And, of course, even Haman must have been a bit nervous by this point. He was at this time building a giant gallows to execute the very person that the king wanted to honor above all else.

Esther 6:11-14

11 Then took Haman the apparel and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and brought him on horseback through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour. 12 And Mordecai came again to the king's gate. But Haman hastened to his house mourning, and having his head covered. 13 And Haman told Zeresh his wife and all his friends every thing that had befallen him. Then said his wise men and Zeresh his wife unto him, If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him. 14 And while they were yet talking with him, came the king's chamberlains, and hastened to bring Haman unto the banquet that Esther had prepared.

In verse 11, Haman takes the robes and the horse, and he dresses Mordecai in them and leads him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.”

If I had written the book of Esther, I would have turned verse 11 into an entire chapter. Elsewhere we are told exactly what Haman was thinking – what was he thinking here? How did Mordecai react to the sudden reversal? What were the people thinking? What was the horse thinking?

“Only an author with a sure hand and confidence in his reader would allow this climax in the bitter relationship between the two protagonists to pass with so few words and leave so much to the audience. A skilled author knows when not to say too much.”

And, of course, the skilled author of Esther is the Holy Spirit! You can't get any more skilled than that!

Later Jewish tradition could not help but heap more disgrace upon poor Haman. They said that as Haman led Mordecai through the streets, Haman's daughter looked out a balcony window and thought that the splendid man on

the horse must be her father, and the inglorious figure leading him about must be Mordecai. To further abuse the Jew, she dumped a chamber pot on his head. When Haman looked up and reproached her, she was so shocked that she fell from the balcony and died. (This, they say, is why Haman is mourning in verse 12, but the Hebrew word used there can refer to just a feeling of great distress over any great loss or calamity.)

Can't we picture the scene as they march all through the city in grim silence with the only words being Haman's proclamation, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor." Can't we picture their faces? Just another example of why the book is always better than the movie!

Mordecai returns to the King's Gate, and what does Haman do next? What else? He runs back home to his wife!

In verse 12, Haman covers his head in grief. Later, in Chapter 7, we will see Haman's head covered once again.

Haman's wife and his friends seem to see the handwriting on the wall, and they begin to distance themselves from Haman – saying in verse 13 that "you" (not "we") will surely come to ruin!

How did they know that? Most likely, God placed a word of prophecy on their tongue. Either that, or perhaps they knew about the ancient prophecy regarding the Agagites, or perhaps they knew trouble would come quickly when the king finally figured out what Haman had led him to sign. For whatever reason, his wife and his so-called wise men (at least they were wise after the fact!) tell Haman the truth – he will soon come to ruin.

Verse 13 is a reversal of the advice that his wife and his friends had given him shortly before in 5:14. There, they had told Haman that by killing Mordecai, Haman could make his life happy and fulfilling; here, they tell Haman that he cannot kill Mordecai and that he is heading for a downfall.

Once again, it is significant that the voice of insight comes from a woman, the wife of Haman, Zeresh. Xerxes has repeatedly shown himself to be clueless.

Haman, too, is frequently oblivious to the significance of the acts transpiring around him. Even Mordecai failed to foresee that his disrespect of Haman would have dire repercussions. But here Zeresh, like Esther herself, proves to be a person of insight.

The book of Esther has an elaborate structure in which a sudden turn of events reverses the intended and expected action, and in which events have corresponding parallels that occur in reverse order. (Recall the handout from our introductory classes on Esther.)

We usually focus on Esther's role in Haman's downfall, but note that Haman's downfall already seems inevitable by the end of this chapter – **before** the confrontation with Esther.

That is why most commentators point to the king's sleepless night as the pivot about which this book turns.

Why is that important? Because choosing such a seemingly insignificant pivot highlights God's providential role in the events and takes the focus away from human actions. These reversals are not occurring by accident, but they are also not occurring due to the work of man. Someone else is involved here!

And this key theme of reversal is not a theme that is limited just to this book of Esther. As Christians, we have experienced the ultimate reversal of fortune – none could be greater!

Although once formerly in exile, apart from God and expecting nothing but death, we experienced a complete reversal.

And what was the pivot point for that great reversal? It was a seemingly insignificant event – the birth of a baby in Bethlehem and his later execution on a cross. To the world it seems foolishness – but to us it is the power of God!

And what is the pivot point for our own personal reversal? Isn't it our baptism?

Romans 6:4 – Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Baptism is the point where we pass from death to life – baptism is the pivot point of our great reversal! Baptism is the precise point where everything about us changes. Before baptism we are dead; after baptism we are alive. Could we ever experience a greater reversal than that?

Denominations belittle baptism because they say it is a work of man, and man is not saved by works. But baptism is not a work of man – the Bible tells us that baptism is a work of God (Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5)!

Just as with the sleepless night of Xerxes, baptism is the seemingly insignificant pivot point about which everything turns. It is the point at which God does his great work of transferring us from the power of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son (Colossians 1:13). That is not our work; it is God's work!

I am always amazed when someone describes baptism as a meritorious work of man. Think about the steps of salvation: hear, believe, repent, confess, **be** baptized. Let's put our English teacher hats on and look at those five verbs – four of them are active and one of them is passive. Which of the five do the denominations argue is a work of man? The only one that is passive! Their blindness is truly incredible!

And what about those today who reject the gospel? They are following the path of Haman, and like Haman they will discover that they have been caught in a trap of their own making.

Things are clearly out of control for Haman in verse 14. The pace of events is accelerating, and Haman is now just along for the ride.

The eunuchs have arrived and have "hasted to bring Haman unto the banquet" that Queen Esther has prepared. The haste points to Haman's importance, not to any tardiness or reluctance on his part.

Yes, Haman is in trouble, but he has no time to worry about that because it is time to head off to the feast with the Queen. Maybe that will take his mind off his troubles! Maybe that will lift his spirits! (Well, it will lift something!)

Esther 7

Reversal continues to be a major theme in Chapter 7.

In Chapter 3, Haman received the honor that Mordecai deserved. In Chapter 6, Mordecai received the honor that Haman had intended for himself. In Chapter 7, Haman will receive the punishment that he had intended for Mordecai.

As before, the reversal in Chapter 7 will hinge on a misunderstanding.

In Chapter 6, Haman misunderstood the reason behind the king's request for advice on how best to honor someone. In Chapter 7, the king will misunderstand Haman's motives in falling upon the queen's couch.

As evil as Haman is, he will ultimately be condemned for two crimes he did **not** commit – swindling the king and attempting to rape the queen.

We have already said that Esther is a textbook about God's providence, and we will really learn some valuable lessons on that subject in Chapter 7.

The reader is asked to consider whether the hidden hand of God's providence has been behind the many reversals we have seen in this book – and the eye of faith can come to no other conclusion.

Esther's elevation to queenship, Mordecai's overhearing the plot against the king, the king's sleepless night and the reading of Mordecai's loyalty in the royal chronicles – who can miss the hand of God in these events?

But in Chapter 7 we will see something else at work – Esther's intellect and Esther's skill with people.

Like Joseph, Esther has been placed in a situation where she has access to a foreign king, and she will use that access to bring deliverance to her people. Like Moses, Esther is in a remarkable position to save the children of Israel from bondage and death. But unlike either Joseph or Moses, Esther has no miraculous powers or (as far as we are told) divine insights.

God creates opportunities, but Esther must act upon them. It is a pattern that God repeats throughout Scripture, and throughout history.

While God initiates the work of deliverance, human response is also required. God will part the Red Sea, but the people must cross over. God will destroy the walls of Jericho, but the Israelites must blow the horns. God sends Jesus Christ to make the way of salvation, but we must obey the gospel.

Esther 7:1-2

So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen. 2 And the king said again unto Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition, queen Esther? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? and it shall be performed, even to the half of the kingdom.

Let's pause for a moment here to look at two words that we have seen throughout these events - petition and request.

Here in verse 2, the king asks Esther, "what is thy petition? What is thy request?" Is the king asking the same question twice - basically, "Esther, what do you want?" Or is there a difference between the two questions?

In verse 3, we will see that Esther understands there to be a difference between the two questions because she will shortly give a different answer to each question - but is that what the king intended, or are we again seeing the cleverness of Esther?

As for the words themselves, the Hebrew word translated "petition" (KJV) or "wish" (ESV) in verse 2 is used in the Bible to denote something that a person or a group asks of another person or asks of God. The same word is used in

Judges 8:24 when Gideon asks for gold earrings from the Ishmaelites, and it is used in 1 Samuel 1:17 to describe Hannah's prayer to God for a son.

The Hebrew word translated "request" (KJV, ESV) in verse 2 is very close to being a synonym of the first word, also meaning simply a request, a desire, or something sought. We will see this same word when we return to Ezra in Ezra 7:6 where it will be used to describe what Ezra requested of the king. And if this second word is not a synonym of the first, then that verse from Ezra 7 may point us to the difference in meaning -- this second word most often refers to requests made to royalty.

As for why the king asks both questions, the answer may be that the king understands that more is going on here than meets the eye. The queen did not risk her life to invite the king to lunch. Yes, that is her request, but there must be something deeper on her mind. What does she really want?

Another possibility is that this is just how things were done in the presence of royalty. As one commentator described it, "the balancing of conventional words and cadences captures the slow rhythm of the east." Perhaps the second word is used to remind Esther that she is asking the king himself for this favor.

And again, whatever the king meant by using both words, Esther will use the king's two questions to her advantage in the next verse by giving a different answer to each.

Another thing we should remember as we start Chapter 7 is that, as we saw in the introduction, feasting is a central theme in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther begins and concludes with pairs of feasts, with another pair of feasts occurring in between. In Chapter 1, Xerxes gave two consecutive feasts, and Chapter 9 will show the Jews observing two consecutive feasts to celebrate their deliverance. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 7, we see another pair of feasts, with Haman's downfall starting to occur in between the two.

As we said in the introduction, the focus on feasting may be a reminder that man has a role to play in God's providence. We certainly see it working that way in this book.

"The second day" in verse 2 refers to the day after the first banquet. It does not mean that this banquet lasted two days.

In verse 2, the King asks Esther for the third time what she wants him to do.

Esther is in a delicate position because she somehow needs to accuse Haman without also accusing the king who had permitted Haman to act with his approval and authority.

Esther knows better than anyone the weak and unstable despot she is dealing with here. To be successful, Esther must never act as if she is bringing a charge directly against the king himself.

Esther 7:3-7

3 Then Esther the queen answered and said, If I have found favour in thy sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request: 4 For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue, although the enemy could not countervail the king's damage. 5 Then the king Ahasuerus answered and said unto Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so? 6 And Esther said, The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman. Then Haman was afraid before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arising from the banquet of wine in his wrath went into the palace garden: and Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king.

The king asked two questions in verse 2 – What is your petition? What is your request? – although as we suggested he may have been seeking just a single answer.

But Esther gives the king two answers in verse 3. She asks for her own life as her petition, and for the life of her people as her request.

We earlier talked about Daniel Moments or Esther Moments. Those are moments in our life when we have an opportunity to stand up and announce to the world whose side we are on. Such moments are coming with increasing frequency today as our own society continues to plunge into the abyss. Esther's own Esther Moment happens right here in verses 3-4.

By her answer, Esther is tying her own life to the life of her people, and at last Esther is telling the king that "her people" are not the same as his people.

And with these words, Esther is bringing down upon herself an irrevocable decree of death. Getting rid of Haman will not get rid of that decree. Esther will remain under sentence of death.

And the king? The king had not been concerned about the destruction of an entire people. Will the destruction of his queen be a different matter?

We should note that Esther is pulling out the big guns now that she is alone with the king and Haman. Yes, Haman was a very close advisor of the king. But was Haman as close to the king as Esther?

Compare Esther's statement in 7:3 ("If I have found favor in your sight, O king...") with her earlier statement in 5:8 ("If I have found favor in the sight of the king..."). Do you see the subtle difference?

In the statement from Chapter 5, Esther addressed the king in the third person, which would have been the normal court protocol (*e.g.*, your majesty, your royal highness). But here in Chapter 7, Esther addresses the king in the second person – "If I have found favor with you, O King."

Why the difference? Because Esther has a special relationship with the king that is closer even than that of Haman, the king's closest advisor, and Esther wants to remind the king of that fact.

LESSON 26

A Question about the Sistine Chapel

The handout shows scenes from the book of Esther as represented by various artists. The photo on the far left is taken from the Sistine Chapel, painted by Michelangelo. That image shows Haman's death (circled in red), and here is how that image is described in the book *Michelangelo And The Sistine Chapel* by Andrew Graham-Dixon:

A number of beautiful drawings survive for the agonized, twisting Haman – considered by Giorgio Vasari as the single most beautiful depiction of the human form on the entire Sistine Chapel ceiling. ... The foreshortening compresses and heightens the sense of Haman's pain. It also enhances the pathos of the hand with which he seems to be groping for something beyond his grasp. He stretches out as if to puncture the membrane of the illusion that constrains him. The gesture is that of one reaching out, in vain, towards the helping hand of another. He looks as though he wants to be pulled out of the shallow space of the painting that is his prison and into the freedom of the world.

The painting of Haman took 24 days to complete (he drew God in a single day!) and must have been very difficult given that more drawings survive for this scene than for any other scene on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. You can still see the nail holes in the scene by which the artist attached the pattern and transferred the design to the damp plaster. (*Michelangelo and the Pope's Ceiling* by Ross King)

Although difficult to see in this photo, Haman is depicted as stripped of his golden clothing and nailed up on the twisted tree, instead of hanging from a noose.

Here is our question: why did Michelangelo depict Haman as dying on a **cross**?

Michelangelo may have relied on the Vulgate, the 4th century Latin translation of the Bible, in which the Latin word "crux" for cross is found in Esther 5:14, although everywhere else the Vulgate uses the word for "gallows."

But, more likely, Michelangelo was relying on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which depicts Haman as having be crucified rather than hanged. Dante compares Haman with the unrepentant thief who was crucified with Christ.

But why did Dante make that comparison? Why did Dante show Haman as dying on a cross?

That decision likely came from an ancient Jewish custom of celebrating the death of Haman and the delivery of Israel by staging a mock-crucifixion of Haman. Some suspected the Jews of using that ritual as a cover to express their contempt for Christ, and so the Theodosian codex of AD 408 prohibited the Jews from:

“Celebrating a certain feast in which they used to express very shrewdly their secret hatred of the crucified Saviour. It was a feast in memory of the fall of their enemy Haman; for they represented him as crucified, and burned his effigy on that day with great shouting and frenzy just as if he were Christ.”

Whether this charge against the Jews was true or not, it is true that the suspicion caused this celebration of the Jews from persecution to instead become a reason for a renewed persecution of the Jews.

Back to Michelangelo, he was likely suggesting that Haman could be seen as an anti-type of Christ in the sense that his death led to a deliverance of God's people. That view is strengthened by the counterpoint image - the bronze serpent, which we know from John 3:14 prefigured the cross.

Esther 7:3-7, Continued

3 Then Queen Esther answered, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. 4 For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.” 5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, “Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?” 6 And Esther said, “A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!” Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. 7 And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman

stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

In verse 4, Esther quotes the very words used in Haman's edict – "For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish" – but she uses the passive voice (e.g., "mistakes were made!") to delay mentioning Haman's name or mentioning that the king himself had been a party to the sale and threatened destruction of her people.

The ingenuity of Esther's tactics becomes evident here. Esther announcing that she had been sold must have mortified the king. And, by using the passive form of the verb, Esther cleverly avoids casting any blame on the king in this matter. In fact, as far as things stand at the end of verse 4, it would be possible for the king to imagine that Esther's distress has nothing at all to do with him.

Esther also uses the personal pronoun "I" ("For we are sold, I and my people..."), driving home the fact that Queen Esther herself, who (by the king's own admission) has pleased him and found favor in his sight, is now slated for execution. The clear implication is that this decree attacking the queen is an indirect attack on the king himself.

Esther has delayed this confrontation with the king three times – there was a delay in approaching the king the first time, there was a delay after she approached him the first time, and there was a delay after the first banquet.

What is the result of all these delays? The result is that Esther is prepared! She has had time to prepare her answer and come up with the best way to respond. If Esther has been praying, and we don't know whether she has, then she has had time to do that as well.

Once again, the book of Esther puts an ironic twist on what a Bible reader might have expected to happen here.

- In Genesis 38, Judah is confronted with his pregnant daughter-in-law, and when Judah demands to know who the father is, she announces that it is he himself.

- In 2 Samuel 12, David is confronted with the story of a man who killed his neighbor's pet lamb. When David demands to know who has done such a thing, he is told, "You are the man."
- In 2 Samuel 14, a woman presents David with a grievance. When he rules that her case is just, she reveals that the story is really about David and his son, Absalom.

The result here in verse 5 starts out the same way – the king asks, "Who is he, and where is he, that durst presume in his heart to do so?"

Apparently the edict had made so little an impression on the king that Esther's direct quotation from the edict does not even ring a bell with Xerxes! But I bet the queen's quotation from the edict was sure ringing a bell with Haman!

The king, of course, was himself responsible for selling the Jews into destruction. And when the king expresses his outrage over the act, the stage is set for Esther to reveal that it is Xerxes himself who is guilty. I doubt any of us would have been surprised had Esther done to Xerxes what Samuel did to David - "You are the man!"

But that is not what happens. Instead, Esther points her finger at Haman, but she builds the suspense by not revealing Haman's name until the end of the clause in verse 6: "The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman." Or as the ESV translates it, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!"

Yes, Esther is accusing Haman in the conspiracy against the Jews, but the text's use of language about God's people being sold may be taking this opportunity to remind us all of the real reason why Israel found itself in this predicament. It is not only Haman who has "sold" the Jews, but they had sold themselves.

Isaiah 50:1 – "Thus saith the LORD, Where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? or which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities have ye sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away."

The Jews were not in Persia by accident. They were in Persia because of how the Jews had lived prior to the exile. They had, in effect, sold themselves to

their oppressors. There is a lot of Biblical baggage attached to that little word “sold” in verse 4.

We might ask whether the king even knows yet that Esther is Jewish.

Haman never mentioned the Jews by name when he convinced the king to issue the edict, and Esther does not mention the Jews by name here. The King knows that Mordecai is a Jew (6:10), but the king does not yet know that Esther and Mordecai are related. That fact is not revealed to him until Esther 8:1.

Just how clueless is the great king Xerxes? Did he even now know that Queen Esther is Jewish? He know it now if he had bothered to read his own edict against her people, which mentioned the Jews by name (3:13), but had the king ever read his own edict of genocide?

Esther’s genius really shines through in verse 4, where she bases her appeal in part on the king’s own self-interest. Haman had done the same thing in 3:8-9 when he first proposed the massacre. There, Haman appealed to the king’s greed: “it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them.” Esther does the same here. That fact alone tells us a great deal about Xerxes and his motivations.

In verse 4, Esther says: “But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my tongue.” Why? Because, presumably, such a sale would have brought revenue to the king. This destruction, however, will not prove profitable to the king.

But what about the 10,000 talents of silver that Haman has promised the king back in Esther 3:9?

This question brings us to final clause in verse 4, translated in the KJV as “although the enemy could not countervail the king’s damage.”

That short clause has been called the most difficult and controversial phrase in the entire book of Esther. One commentary says that the phrase is

“undoubtedly the most difficult clause to translate in all of Esther, primarily because the meanings of three of the six words in it are uncertain.”

The difficulty arises from several factors:

- The conjunction (“although” in the KJV) is typically rendered “because,” and can have several different meanings, including “that” or “but.”
- The noun can mean “the enemy,” or it can mean “the trouble” or “the distress.”
- The verbal phrase (“could not countervail” in the KJV) generally has the sense of comparison, but it can be rendered “equal to,” “worth,” “fitting” or “sufficient for,” depending on context.
- The noun (“king’s damage” in the KJV), though common in post-biblical Hebrew, occurs only here in the Old Testament, and its meaning is disputed.

These problems have led to the clause being translated in a variety of ways.

- “For our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king.”
- “For the adversary who has done this is not worthy of the king’s court.”
- “For the man who did evil against us has changed his behavior.”
- “Because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”
- “But no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.”

One commentary makes a good case for the following translation: “but the money of the oppressor is not equal to the financial loss of the king.” And I think that translations makes the most sense based on the context in which the phrase appears.

First, it seems best to take the opening noun to refer to an enemy rather than just to distress. The same word is used two verses later to refer to an enemy. (“The adversary and enemy is this wicked Haman.”)

This choice also makes sense when viewed in context with the king's question in 7:5. He asks who the person is who has done this thing. That would be the natural response if Esther had just stated that an enemy was attempting to swindle the king. If Esther had instead merely mentioned "distress," then the natural response from the king would have been to ask, "How have you been sold?" rather than, "Who has done this?"

Second, the second noun in the phrase, as we said, occurs only here in the Old Testament. But in non-Biblical writings, the same noun typically means financial damage.

In light of the fact that Esther is portraying the edict against the Jews as a financial transaction, a similar meaning would make sense here. What financial loss would the king suffer? Lost income from taxation, as well as lost services that the Jews might otherwise provide.

Haman had argued that the king should not put up with the Jews because they were not "profitable." Esther argues here that the loss of the Jews will represent a huge financial blow to the king that Haman has not adequately compensated.

Third, the verb phrase "could not countervail" in the KJV is also uncommon.

It is used two other times in Esther. First, it is used in 3:8, where Haman advises the king that it would not be "worth it" for him to put up with the Jews, and, second, it is used in 5:13, where Haman states that all his riches and honors are "worth nothing" to him so long as Mordecai sits in the king's gate.

With the preposition found here, the verb typically means "equal to," "comparable to," or "worth," as in Proverbs 3:15 – "She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her."

Literally, then, this clause could be translated, "The oppressor is not worth the financial loss of the king."

Given how much the book of Esther loves reversals, that reading seems right. In 3:8-9, Haman told Xerxes that it was not profitable for the king to tolerate the Jews, but, now, Esther tells the king that it is not profitable for him to tolerate Haman.

Perhaps when Esther mentions the oppressor, she is really referring to the oppressor's bribe. But it would have been indelicate for Esther to explicitly mention the money that Haman had promised the king because that detail would have drawn attention to the king's own responsibility in the affair and would have cast him a bad light.

In short, Esther's appeal here is a request for her people to be spared, but it is couched in terms of the king's financial interests.

The Jews have been sold, but not as slaves. Presumably they would have brought market value in the slave trade, and the king would have received a large sum. But they have been sold simply to be destroyed, and the compensation the king received (as large as it was) was not sufficient to offset the loss of revenue from tribute, gifts, and labor that the king would receive from allowing the Jews to live.

There is certainly merit to Esther's argument. While we do not know how many Jews lived in the Persian Empire, it could have numbered more than a million. If there were a million Jews in the Persian Empire, their value on the slave market would have far exceeded Haman's bribe. As Esther presented the issue, Haman appeared to be swindling King Xerxes out of a huge sum of money.

Another clever aspect of Esther's plea is that it invites the king to consider the question of whether the Jews really deserved to be enslaved.

According to Herodotus, rebellious vassals could indeed be sold as slaves. But how could Xerxes brand the Jews as rebels on the very day when he had ordered Mordecai the Jew to be honored for saving the king's life? If the Jews

could not reasonably be painted as insurrectionists and sold as slaves, then they would surely not be deserving of the much harsher penalty of genocide.

Esther finally reveals the villain in verse 6, but, as we said, even then she delays mentioning his name until the very last word – “A hateful man and an enemy! This vile Haman!” We can almost hear Esther emphasizing each word with a stabbing finger pointed straight at Haman.

There is a key phrase at the end of verse 6 that tells us exactly how this will all turn out for Haman – “the king and the queen.” The fact that the king and queen are mentioned together shows us how her status has risen, even as she must beg for the king’s mercy. Haman trembles before both the king and the queen, recognizing that she is at least as dangerous as her husband.

Yet another reversal has occurred: Haman was enraged when Mordecai did not shake before him (5:9), but now it is the king who is enraged, and it is Haman who is trembling in terror.

Have you ever had a bad day? I mean, a **really** bad day? Your bad day has probably never been as bad as the day Haman was now having.

Remember that Haman had just returned from leading Mordecai on horseback throughout the city, and now Haman learns that the Queen is Jewish, and so she is subject to the edict of death that he convinced the king to sign. Can things get any worse for Haman? Yes! (And one should never ask that question!)

The king has good cause to be enraged. Earlier, his anger flared when Queen Vashti refused to appear before him, and so the king got a new queen. Now, it appears that someone is trying to deprive him of his new queen – and that someone is none other than his trusted advisor, Haman.

Torn between loyalty to his wife and to his second in command, the king does what any good commander would do in such a situation – he leaves the room!

We already know that Xerxes is not a decisive man, and we already know that he does not commit himself to a course of action without input from his advisors. But now, it is his chief advisor who stands accused. From whom can the king seek counsel?

Is the great and powerful Xerxes finally going to be forced to make a decision all on his own? Will he be able to stand the strain? Can the king punish Haman for a plot that he himself approved? If so, won't the king have to admit his own fault? And how can the king or anyone else revoke an irrevocable law?

And what does Haman do while the king is outside thinking? Haman has moved to Plan B. He stays behind with Esther to beg for his life.

Court protocol dictated that no man other than the king himself or a eunuch could ever be alone with a woman from the king's harem. We don't know if Harbona in verse 9 was with the king in the garden or remained behind with Esther. In any event, Haman should have left the queen's presence when the king left the room. But wouldn't that make Haman look guilty?

Even in the presence of others, no other man (who either wasn't a eunuch or didn't want to quickly become one) was allowed to come within seven steps of a woman from the king's harem. Haman forgets this rule as he falls on the couch where Esther is reclining. This was so unthinkable that some early Jewish commentaries said that Haman fell on the couch only because the angel Gabriel had given him a firm shove!

It was the custom of Persian nobles to recline on couches when they dined. Haman had risen from his couch, but Esther remained recumbent, seemingly unmoved by Haman's plight.

According to Plutarch, touching the Persian king's wife was a capital offense. Haman must surely have been out of his mind to have made such an error.

Why did Haman stay with Esther rather than follow the king? Perhaps because Haman knew that the real power in this situation lay not with King Xerxes. The King had made a promise to Queen Esther, and so in Haman's mind she was

the only one who could save him now. But, of course, the real power was not with either Xerxes or Esther, but rather was with one who is not mentioned in the book. Who is really in charge here? The text has been calling upon us all to ask ourselves that question for seven chapters so far.

Esther 7:8-10

8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the bed whereon Esther was. Then said the king, Will he force the queen also before me in the house? As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face. 9 And Harbonah, one of the chamberlains, said before the king, Behold also, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman had made for Mordecai, who had spoken good for the king, standeth in the house of Haman. Then the king said, Hang him thereon. 10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.

Remember when we asked whether things could get any worse for poor Haman? They do so in verse 8 with yet another remarkable coincidence.

The king walks back into the room at the very moment that Haman falls on the couch, causing the king to ask, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?"

When the king returns from the garden, Haman has fallen before Esther, prostrating himself in a manner that Mordecai had refused to do before him. Mordecai would not bow (3:2), nor would he stand (5:9), nor would he tremble (5:9). Haman is forced to tremble (7:6), then to stand (7:7), then to bow (7:8).

The Jew could not be forced to humiliate himself before the Amalekite, even by the order of the king, but the Amalekite humiliates himself before a Jew willingly.

Many consider this scene to be the funniest scene in the book of Esther. The king has returned from his walk to find Haman sprawled atop the queen. Haman is begging for his life, but the king accuses him of trying to assault the queen. But the attack does not seem to be the real issue for the king: it is the

fact that the attack occurs in his presence, “with me in the house.” It is not the insult to the queen, but the insult to the king that really matters here.

What is really going on here? The king must have known that Haman had not seen this time as the perfect opportunity to assault the queen. Instead, the king interprets Haman’s actions that way so that he can condemn Haman without implicating himself in Haman’s plot against the Jews. Haman’s apparent assault will allow the king’s own complicity to remain hidden and unexamined. Even though Haman is guilty of many crimes, Haman is about to be executed for a crime he did not actually commit!

The end of verse 8 ends with an interesting detail – “they covered Haman’s face.”

While it may have been customary in ancient Greece and Rome to cover the head of condemned prisoners, we are told that there is no evidence for such a practice among the Persians. (But, of course, that statement forgets that the book of Esther could itself be evidence of such a practice!) Most likely this covering was done simply to keep the king from having to see Haman’s face.

This covering also reminds us of Esther 6:12, where Haman rushed home with his head covered after his humiliation before Mordecai. That verse, we now see, foreshadowed this event where others covered his face for him.

Is it still possible for things to get even worse for Haman? Yes!

A very helpful eunuch (likely the same Harbona mentioned in 1:10) points out that there is a ready-made gallows that can be used to get rid of troublesome Haman. Clearly, this eunuch had little love for Haman. He, and many others, had likely been mistreated by pompous, self-important Haman.

The eunuch tells the king that Haman had built a giant gallows for the purpose of killing Mordecai – the very person who had saved the king’s life and who had just been honored by the king.

The king no doubt saw this revelation as a threat to his own life by the villainous Haman, who must, the king likely reasoned, have secret sympathies for the attempted assassins (whom the king must have feared, and rightly so because he would later be assassinated).

Haman, the king had discovered, wanted to murder the king's rescuer and attack the king's wife all on the same day!

Once again, the narrator gives us an ironic twist. Haman's death occurs on the same instrument of doom that he had created for Mordecai. The pike that was going to show everyone what happens to those who oppose Haman became the place for demonstrating what happens to those who oppose the Jews.

With Haman executed, the king's anger abates. The wording in verse 10 reminds us of 2:1, where the king's wrath against Vashti abated.

In Chapter 1, the flaring of the king's anger led to the removal of the queen; when it abated, he chose a new queen. In this chapter, the king's wrath meant the removal of Haman. The abating of Xerxes' wrath signals the coming of Haman's replacement, which will occur in the next chapter.

Of all of the reversals in the book, Haman's reversal may be the greatest and most sudden. One day he was on top of the world, and the next day he was standing at the top of his own gallows. Overnight the tables had turned for Haman, and he did not see it coming.

This entire scene is steeped in irony. Both Esther and Haman plead for their lives in Chapter 7. Mordecai the Jew initiated the conflict by refusing to bow before Haman the Agagite, but here we see Haman the Agagite falling down before a Jewish woman. And, in the end, Haman's fate was sealed by something as seemingly insignificant as the king's sleepless night.

LESSON 27

A Few More Comments About Haman

If you ask most Egyptologists today, they will tell you that the Exodus is a myth. Perhaps the best known Egyptologist today is Zahi Hawass, and he has said that there is no archeological evidence for the Exodus; it is pure myth.

Two questions: (1) How should we respond to those charges? And, (2) what does any of this have to do with the book of Esther?

Let's start with the second question first.

Recall that when we first met Haman, we said that the most important thing about Haman was his nationality. Haman was an Agagite, which was the reason for his conflict with Mordecai.

The Agagites were the Amalekites, with the name Agagite coming from the name of the two most famous Amalekite kings - the first and the last both being named Agag. And the Amalekites met up with the Israelites as they were leaving Egypt in the Exodus.

The ancient animosity between the Jews and the Amalekites is the backdrop for the entire book of Esther, with the not so subtle message that if King Saul had obeyed God and destroyed all of the Amalekites centuries earlier, then the near destruction of God's people in Esther's day would not have occurred.

So, back to our second question - what does modern skepticism about the Exodus have to do with the book of Esther? To answer that question, we need to ask another question, one that we briefly considered earlier but that I want us to look at now in more detail - who were the Amalekites?

The most common answer to that question that you will hear today is that the Amalekites were an ancient band of bedouin robbers that, along with a few other similar groups, caused some trouble for the Israelites after the Exodus.

But does that view agree with what the Bible says about the Amalekites? Let's take a look. The Bible has quite a bit to say about the Amalekites.

The Israelites of the Exodus met the Amalekites before they reached Mt. Sinai, which was the beginning of a very long conflict.

Exodus 17:8 - Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

Exodus 17:16 - "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Later the Israelites found the southern approach to Canaan blocked by the Amalekites.

Numbers 13:29 - The Amalekites dwell in the land of the Negeb.

The Amalekites were a cause of the 40 year wilderness wandering of the Israelites.

Numbers 14:25 - Now, since the Amalekites and the Canaanites dwell in the valleys, turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea.

When the Israelites tried to enter the promised land early, the Amalekites defeated them.

Numbers 14:42-45 - Do not go up, for the LORD is not among you, lest you be struck down before your enemies. For there the Amalekites and the Canaanites are facing you, and you shall fall by the sword. Because you have turned back from following the LORD, the LORD will not be with you." But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, although neither the ark of the covenant of the LORD nor Moses departed out of the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them and pursued them, even to Hormah.

Balaam mentions an early Amalekite king, Agog.

Numbers 24:7 - Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; **his king shall be higher than Agag**, and his kingdom shall be exalted.

And Balaam describes the Amalekites themselves.

Numbers 24:20 - Then he looked on Amalek and took up his discourse and said, "**Amalek was the first among the nations**, but its end is utter destruction."

Does that description of the Amalekites and their king, Agag, sound like an unimportant band of robbers?

The Amalekites are mentioned frequently in the 400 year period of Joshua and Judges.

Saul later defeated the Amalekites and their King Agag (a later Agag than the one mentioned by Balaam), but Saul allowed some to escape.

1 Samuel 15:7-9 - And Saul defeated the Amalekites from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive and devoted to destruction all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fattened calves and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them. All that was despised and worthless they devoted to destruction.

David also fought the Amalekites after they kidnapped two of his wives, but David also allowed some to escape.

1 Samuel 30:17 - And David struck them down from twilight until the evening of the next day, and not a man of them escaped, except four hundred young men, who mounted camels and fled.

So what have we seen?

The Amalekites were a formidable and long-lived force that fought God's people for over 400 years, from the time of the Exodus until the days of King Saul and King David.

Now, here is the million dollar question - **what was Egypt doing during this same time period?**

The standard answer to that question is that Egypt was in the middle of their powerful New Kingdom period during this entire time. If so, that would mean that Palestine was dominated by Egypt during the entire 400 years of Joshua and Judges.

But is that what we see in the Bible? In a word, no. That is not at all what we see in the Bible.

When we read the book of Joshua, we do not find Egypt doing anything. Likewise, when we read the book of Judges, we don't find Egypt doing anything. We hear nothing from Egypt until we read of Solomon's marriage alliance with Egypt.

1 Kings 3:1 - Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt. He took Pharaoh's daughter and brought her into the city of David until he had finished building his own house and the house of the LORD and the wall around Jerusalem.

And we finally see Egypt's military again with regard to that marriage.

1 Kings 9:16 - Pharaoh king of Egypt had gone up and captured Gezer and burned it with fire, and had killed the Canaanites who lived in the city, and had given it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife.

After the time of the Exodus, we do not see Egypt making any military move against the Israelites until the days of King Rehoboam, over 400 years after the Exodus.

1 Kings 14:25 - In the fifth year of King Rehoboam, Shishak king of Egypt came up against Jerusalem.

How can this be explained if the standard chronology of Egypt is correct?

The answer is that it cannot be explained - unless the standard Egyptian chronology is wrong. And I think the Bible proves that the standard Egyptian chronology must be wrong.

But how wrong is it? How many years off is it? Let's look at the clues.

If the standard view is wrong, and the Exodus did not occur in Egypt's New Kingdom period, then when did the Exodus occur? Perhaps the reason why the Egyptologists can find no evidence of the Exodus is because they are looking for it in the wrong time period.

What should we look for in Egyptian history to locate the time of the Exodus?
I think we can use two things to locate it - the plagues and the Amalekites.

As for the plagues, they must have left Egypt very badly damaged. We sometimes think of the plagues in terms of the popular movie, but they were much worse than that.

Exodus 9:6 - All the livestock of the Egyptians died.

Exodus 9:24-25 - There was hail and fire flashing continually in the midst of the hail, very heavy hail, such as had never been in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. The hail struck down everything that was in the field in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast. And the hail struck down every plant of the field and broke every tree of the field.

Exodus 10:14-15 - The locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever will be again. They covered the face of the whole land, so that the land was darkened, and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Not a green thing remained, neither tree nor plant of the field, through all the land of Egypt.

Exodus 12:29 - At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.

So, it shouldn't surprise us if the Egyptian society was at a very low point after the Israelites left. The plagues must have left Egypt very much weakened.

But things would soon be much worse for Egypt. Why? Because the Amalekites were heading south when the Jews passed them on their own exodus out of Egypt.

And I don't think this was a coincidence. God did not want the Egyptians to follow the Jews, attacking them and trying to drag them back to Egypt. And so God gave the Egyptians something else to keep them busy - the Amalekites.

Can we find a period like that in Egyptian history? Yes, we can.

The end of the Middle Kingdom was just such a time, and the invading force that ended the Middle Kingdom and that controlled Egypt during the period between the Middle and the New Kingdom were the Hyksos.

I think, based on what we read in the Bible, that the Exodus occurred at the end of the Middle Kingdom, and that the Hyksos and the Amalekites are one and the same people.

Is there any evidence outside the Bible for that identification? Yes.

For example, in Egyptian texts, the Hyksos are called the Amu (similar to Amalekites), and the Hyksos king is called Apop (similar to Agog). In fact, the Egyptian sources tell us that there were two famous Hyksos kings called Apop, one at the first and one at the end (just as the Bible tells us about Agog of the Amalekites). And those same sources tell us that the Hyksos were eventually expelled by a foreign power, which would be King Saul if the Hyksos and the Amalekites are the same group.

So, back then to our earlier question. If the Hyksos and the Amalekites are the same group, then how far off is the standard chronology of Egypt? About 600 years. An Egyptologist would tell you that the Hyksos were expelled around 1600 BC. I think the Bible tells us that event occurred around 1000 BC.

Who were the Hyksos? One historian says that with that question the entire structure of ancient history hangs in the balance. I think the Bible answers that question, and I think the Egyptian chronology is off by six centuries, which explains why they can find no evidence for the events described in the Bible. They are looking for that evidence in the wrong time.

And as for the book of Esther, the evil Haman was an Amalekite. Each time we see the Jews battling the Amalekites, we are told that some of the Amalekites escaped, so it should not surprise us to find one centuries later in the days of Queen Esther.

And if we are correct, then Haman was a Hyksos, a group of warriors described as being “imbued to the core with a spirit of destruction.” And that description fits well with what the Bible tells us about Haman.

Back to Esther 7:8-10

Some commentators argue that Esther should have interceded for Haman, telling the king that he was not actually attacking her. One writes that Esther’s “character would have been more attractive if she had shown pity toward a fallen foe.”

These commentators remind of those neighbors who brag about how they always re-locate snakes that they find. I also re-locate snakes -- I re-locate them to the next life! The only non-poisonous snakes are the snakes that are far away from me.

We have a similar situation here in Esther. Haman was not at this time a **fallen** foe – Haman was a **falling** foe. He could yet do much damage while he remained alive.

And are they really asking Esther to follow the example of King Saul, who years earlier had spared the life of another Agagite against God’s explicit command?

Esther had finally succeeded where Saul had failed – and Esther, like Saul, was acting with royal authority. In fact, what had Mordecai said to her in 4:14? “Who knoweth whether thou art come **to the kingdom** for such a time as this?” As Queen of Persia, Esther was now Queen of the Jews, and Esther as Queen was carrying out a royal sentence on this great enemy of God’s people.

Showing pity to Haman would have been wrong, just as King Saul’s pity toward Haman’s ancestor was wrong and disqualified Saul from being king. Esther killed Haman with her cleverness just as Saul **should** have killed Agag with his sword. What was at stake here was God’s plan of redemption! There was only one way for Haman to exit, and Esther made sure that was how Haman left!

Haman died in his own trap.

Proverbs 11:6 - The righteousness of the upright delivers them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their lust.

And the same is true today. Many are caught in a trap of wickedness and deceit, and for many that trap is their own creation. They thought they could control it and use it on others, but in the end they were the ones captured by it. Haman was not the first nor the last to die on his own gallows!

Although one might expect the book of Esther to end with Chapter 7, a very serious problem still remains. How can Esther revoke an irrevocable law?

Although Haman is dead, Haman's edict against the Jews lives on. The death of Haman is **not** the climax of the book.

Revelation 14:13 – Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; **and their works do follow them.**

Sadly, the opposite is also true. The works of the evil follow them as well. And we are about to see how the evil works of Haman followed him after his death.

What other lessons for today can we learn from this confrontation between Esther and Haman in Chapter 7. I have a commentary from 1898 that suggested we can learn the following three lessons.

First, we can learn something about how Esther accused Haman, and particularly how Esther did not accuse Haman. She could have started a rumor campaign against him, but she did not. She could have tried to poison the king's mind against his top advisor, but she did not. We have no record that Esther said anything critical of Haman prior to the accusation she made in front of the king. When the time came for Esther to confront Haman, she did it face to face. If Haman had any defense, Esther was giving him his chance to make it and defend himself.

Second, we can learn the lesson of Galatians 6:7 - "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap." I'm not sure we can find a much better example of that verse than that provided by Haman.

He sowed a gallows for Mordecai, and he then reaped that same gallows for himself!

Third, we can learn a lesson about how rapidly the wheel of fortune revolves. Here is how that 1898 described this lesson:

Of all the fickle things under the sun, Fortune is the most fickle. She is more so than the wind. Between the rising and setting of every sun she changes her mind. In the morning she smiles, in the evening she frowns. With one breath she shouts your praise, with the next she blights your hopes. She cheers when you go up, she mocks when you come down. Oh, let us not worship at the shrine of a goddess so fickle and so false. Let us anchor our souls in God. Then, come sorrow or gladness, success or failure, riches or poverty, honor or shame, health or sickness, life or death, time or eternity, all is ours, and we are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

One reason I particularly like that third lesson is that it provides a reminder of the key theme of this book - reversal! This book is full of reversals, and so are our own lives today. How do we deal with reversals in our life? How do we weather that storm? As with the events in Esther, we need to look for the hand of God, and we need to obey God and we need to trust in the arm of God rather than the arm of man whatever our surrounding circumstances.

So where are we at the end of Chapter 7? Haman has left the building, but his irrevocable decree has not. Also, a vacancy has opened up on the king's staff.

Esther 8:1-2

On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman the Jews' enemy unto Esther the queen. And Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he was unto her. 2 And the king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it unto Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Herodotus tells us that in the Persian Empire the goods and property of condemned criminals were taken over by the king. That appears to have happened here. The Hebrew word translated "house" may have also included Haman's family.

The king gives Haman's house to Queen Esther, likely either to compensate her for her grief or just to demonstrate his royal favor on her.

In verse 1, Mordecai appears before the king for the first time in this book.

Verse 1 tells us that Esther had told the king what Mordecai was to her, which likely means that she told the king more than just that they were related, but also that Mordecai was her advisor and her protector. It seems that, at last, the king finally knows that Esther is a Jew and that his edict had been against Esther's people.

Some commentators find it unbelievable that the king did not already know the relation between Esther and Mordecai. In response, I would ask – have they not been paying attention?

By the time we reach Chapter 9, can anyone be surprised about the cluelessness of this king? Also, Esther and Mordecai had gone to great lengths to keep their relationship secret, using a eunuch to pass messages back and forth. Even devious Haman had not known about the relation between the two.

Mordecai's relation to Esther further increases his status in the eyes of the king. In verse 2, Mordecai takes over the position recently vacated by Haman, making Mordecai second in command to the king.

Esther also sets Mordecai over the house of Haman. This action really shows us how Esther has changed. When she was introduced to us, she was an orphan, taken in by Mordecai. Now, she is Mordecai's benefactor. In a book of reversals, perhaps the greatest reversal is the dramatic change we see in Esther herself and in the relation between Esther and Mordecai.

Should Esther have given Haman's property to Mordecai, and should Mordecai have accepted it?

If Mordecai's motivation in creating this huge problem had been to right the wrong that King Saul caused in disobeying God's commands about the

Amalekites, then one might have expected Mordecai himself to obey the command.

1 Samuel 15:3 – Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.

Saul did not obey that command.

1 Samuel 15:9 - Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.

Here in Esther, it again seems that a part of that command is obeyed and a part is not obeyed. But once again we should ask whether that was a command intended for Mordecai in the first place? Did God want Mordecai to disobey King Xerxes because of what had happened hundreds of years earlier back in 1 Samuel 15?

If so, how can we reconcile that with the much more recent command in Jeremiah?

Jeremiah 29:7 – And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

Hadn't all of the trouble here started after Mordecai disobeyed that explicit command in Jeremiah 29 that was made to all of the exiles, including himself? Was Mordecai seeking the peace of the city when he stubbornly refused to honor Haman? Is Mordecai an example of obedience or disobedience?

Why is Mordecai promoted to Haman's vacant office?

One possibility is that Mordecai's advancement is meant to compensate Esther for the grief she suffered because of Haman's decree. In that case, it is Esther who is being compensated, not Mordecai.

Another possibility goes back to our earlier theory that one reason (perhaps one of several reasons) why Mordecai refused to bow down before Haman

was because he felt Haman had received the promotion unjustly, and that it should have been his for saving the king's life. In that case, Xerxes' elevation of Mordecai would simply be righting the wrong that had led to all the unpleasantness in the first place.

But if Mordecai's promotion is simply a reward for his deliverance of the king from the assassination plot, does that seem overly generous? Overhearing a conversation would not necessarily make one qualified to be a chief administrator. But, according to Herodotus, Xenagoras was made governor of all Cilicia as a reward for saving the life of the king's brother during a brawl. Here the reward was for saving the life of the king himself – a policy the king certainly wanted to encourage!

The transfer of the signet ring is somewhat different here than in the case of Haman. Haman had not received the ring when installed in office, but only when the king commissioned him to write the edict concerning the Jews in 3:10. But here the signet ring is transferred as a sign of office. All the power **eventually** granted to Haman with the signet ring is **immediately** given to Mordecai, empowering him to do whatever can be done to overturn Haman's edict.

Although there are certainly some key differences, I think the text is inviting us to compare Mordecai with Joseph.

- Both Mordecai and Joseph received a signet ring from the king (Genesis 41:42).
- Both Mordecai and Joseph were Israelites residing in a foreign land as exiles.
- Both Mordecai and Joseph were threatened by the authorities.
- Both Mordecai and Joseph were promoted to second-in-command.
- Both Mordecai and Joseph used their authority to secure the salvation of their people.

Earlier we also looked at some similarities between Esther and Joseph. Why are these connections to Joseph important? Because God is not mentioned in this book. To the careful student of the Bible, these similarities with Joseph are an unmistakable sign that God is acting behind the scenes here.

Haman had sought to publicly humiliate and kill Mordecai, but now ironically – and in a great reversal – Haman is dead and Mordecai has taken his place both in the palace and in Haman’s own home. What comes around goes around!

LESSON 28

Esther 8:3-6

3 And Esther spake yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews. 4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king, 5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces: 6 For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?

Although Esther had saved the Jews from Haman, Haman's handiwork remained in the form of an irrevocable sentence of death against the Jews. And so Esther falls at the king's feet and pleads with him to reverse Haman's evil plan.

Some understand these verses as describing a second time at which Esther risked her life by approaching the king unsummoned – and we do see the king hold out his scepter to her in verse 4.

But a better view is that verse 3 is just a continuation of the scene in verses 1-2, which would mean that the scepter here is just an encouragement by the king for Esther to rise and speak.

This latter view seems better because, unlike verse 1, verse 3 does not provide a time frame ("on that day"), and verse 3 says "Esther spoke" rather than "Esther entered." Esther does not seem to have left the king's presence, and so this is likely not another case where she is appearing unsummoned.

Verse 3 is the first time since 3:10 that Haman has been specifically identified as "Haman the Agagite." Haman is mentioned by name 44 times in Esther, but

he is identified as an Agagite only four times – each time in the context of his plot against the Jews.

This usage supports, and we might even say confirms, the view that the animosity between Haman and Mordecai was due to racial hatred. Verse 7 will again refer to Mordecai as “Mordecai the Jew.”

In verse 5, Esther again stresses the ethnic dispute that led to the edict – Haman the Agagite sought to destroy the Jews – perhaps hoping that the king would see that he (and Persia) had been used by Haman to further Haman’s own personal agenda against the Jews.

Once again, Esther must proceed very carefully. In Chapter 7, Esther could present the matter as one of personal insult to the king, and as an attempt by Haman to swindle him. But here the king’s honor is no longer at issue. In fact, Esther might be asking the king to do something here that would be seen as dishonorable - rescinding an order that he had already signed into law.

This second appeal to the king may have taken more courage than the first. The king had a personal interest in the first appeal (the life of his queen and the reward to Mordecai for saving his life), but the king had no personal interest in saving all the other Jews (unless he had believed Esther’s argument about their financial worth!).

In fact, history tells us that Xerxes had reversed the policies of religious tolerance of his predecessors (such as Cyrus) and had destroyed many temples of Marduk in favor of his own Zoroastrian philosophy. Why would this king help the Jews?

Esther asks the king in verse 5 to issue an order revoking the letters issued by Haman. Notice that Esther did not use the word “law” but rather used the word “letters,” perhaps hoping that the king might determine that the edict against the Jews was not really a royal edict at all and so was revocable.

Also, Esther does not use the word “overturn,” but rather uses the word “recall.” And, as Esther describes it, the letters are not the king’s letters at all

– but they are Haman’s letters, and Haman is an Agagite. Perhaps Haman’s letters could be recalled even if the king’s law could not be overturned.

Can’t we find a loophole somewhere? Esther (thinking like a lawyer!) has suggested three potential loopholes herself! These aren’t laws - they are letters! These aren’t the king’s letters - they are Haman’s! And we don’t need to revoke them - we can just recall them!

Should her legal appeal fail, Esther adds a personal appeal in verse 6. The destruction of her people would be an unbearable tragedy for the queen herself. If the king truly loves Esther, would he not desire to spare her such heartache?

Does Esther’s statement that she does not want to “see” the destruction of her people imply that she expects to escape the destruction herself? Not necessarily. First, the phrase “to see” or “look upon” can be synonymous for “experience.”

Also, unless Esther expected to be the first person executed, she would surely be forced to witness the destruction of her people if the decree were to go into effect.

In 7:3-4, Esther spoke as if she expected to be included in the destruction, and Haman’s death has not changed the situation. No explicit decree has been issued exempting Esther from the slaughter. As unlikely as it might seem that she would be slain, it is still a legal possibility, and one that Esther can use to her advantage.

We often say that we can find Jesus on every page of the Old Testament. Can we find Jesus here? I think we may be seeing in these events some foreshadowing of the gospel. Were the Jews in Esther’s day the only people who were ever under an irrevocable sentence of death? Hardly. All people are under such a decree.

Romans 3:20 - For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Romans 3:23 - For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Romans 6:23 - For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we have said, the theme of reversal is not only the theme of Esther. It the theme of the entire plan of redemption!

And look again at Esther's personal plea in verse 6 - "For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?" Does that remind us of anything?

1 Timothy 2:5 - For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

Like Esther, Jesus was also a deliverer of his people, and like Esther, Jesus was also a mediator on behalf of his people.

Esther 8:7-8

7 Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. 8 Write ye also for the Jews, as it liketh you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring: for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may no man reverse.

The king's statement in verse 7 is not technically correct. The king says that Haman had been executed because he laid his hand upon the Jews, but Haman had been executed, not because he had attempted to lay his hand upon the Jews, but because he had attempted to lay his hands upon one Jew in particular – Queen Esther.

Xerxes is rewriting history a bit, most likely to make the point that he has already done his part in saving the Jews -- while conveniently overlooking the key point that "his part" had been to sign the death edict in the first place!

At the end of verse 8, the king responds to Esther's suggestion that the letters be recalled. The king reminds her that no writing sealed with the king's ring can be recalled. This statement by the king serves two purposes – it explains

why Esther's suggestion will not work, and it explains why the king's suggestion will work.

The law declaring death for the Jews had been sealed with the king's ring and so could not be revoked. So what then is the answer? What can be done? The answer in verse 8 is that another edict could be written, and in this edict the Jews could write as they pleased rather than Haman writing as he pleased.

How do you reverse an irreversible law in a book of reversals? Simple. You write a second irreversible law!

We are about to see a parallel here to what happened earlier in Chapters 3 and 4, but here the tables have been turned. Now the Jews will destroy their enemies rather than being destroyed by them.

As before, the king is unwilling to take any action on his own but instead turns the writing of the edict over to someone else – but this time it is turned over to Mordecai rather than over to Haman.

“Here, yet again, we see Ahasuerus's inability to focus his mind on the details of any matter whatsoever — even the extermination of a substantial body of his people and the potential death of the queen: he repeats his earlier disastrous habits and simply hands authority over to Mordecai.”

One commentator says that the Hebrew words used in verse 7-8 “strongly suggest that the words are spoken in a sharp and exasperated tone of voice,” but most of that tone is lost in the English translation. A better translation might be, “Now look here. I have given Esther the house of Haman. You, you write about the Jews as you like,” or “Look! This is what I have done for you! Not only can you not expect me to do more, but I cannot do more!”

Xerxes' reaction fits well with what we know about him. For starters, he wants the entire thing buried so that his own role will be covered up. In short, the king washes his hands of the matter.

Also, the king does not like being in the position where he is bound by what Haman did and unable to change it. So, as usual, the king turns the entire

problem over to someone else. Xerxes may have failed in many areas, but he was an expert in one thing – he certainly knew how to delegate! No one can ever accuse Xerxes of being a micro-manager!

Esther 8:9-10

9 Then were the king's scribes called at that time in the third month, that is, the month Sivan, on the three and twentieth day thereof; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded unto the Jews, and to the lieutenants, and the deputies and rulers of the provinces which are from India unto Ethiopia, an hundred twenty and seven provinces, unto every province according to the writing thereof, and unto every people after their language, and to the Jews according to their writing, and according to their language. 10 And he wrote in the king Ahasuerus' name, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by posts on horseback, and riders on mules, camels, and young dromedaries:

For those who keep track of such things (and you know who you are!), Esther 8:9 is the longest verse in the Bible. (See this week's handout.)

The 23rd day of the third month in verse 9 was two months and ten days after Haman's edict in Esther 3:12, which occurred on "the thirteenth day of the first month."

This time span could itself be significant. Why? Because two months and ten days is seventy days.

As we know from our study of Daniel, seventy is a significant Biblical number, being the product of two numbers that represent perfection and completion, seven and ten. The number here is a literal 70 days, as was the 70 years of the exile – but (as we saw many times in our earlier studies) it is possible for a literal number to have a figurative meaning. The 70 year exile is a good example; that number was not random. God chose the number 70 for a reason.

The month of Sivan in verse 9 is mentioned only here in the Old Testament. The Babylonian month names were adopted by the Jews during the

Babylonian exile. And, as we have seen, they also adopted Babylonian names for themselves.

The terms in verse 10 describing the types of horses used to distribute the edict in verse 10 are difficult to translate. In fact, the Hebrew text simply transliterates the Persian terms into Hebrew characters. Various translations include “race horses,” “swift dromedaries,” and “post horses.” Taken together, the words likely mean that the very best royal-bred horses were used.

The text takes a significant shift at this point.

From the time where Mordecai first approached Esther about petitioning the king in Chapter 4, the focus has been on Queen Esther and on her plan to get the king to reverse his decree (which didn't happen).

But from this point on, there will be greater emphasis on Mordecai's actions. In fact, Esther is not mentioned at all from 8:9 until 9:12, where the king asks her what more she desires.

We are seeing quite a few “Plan B's” here.

Esther wanted the king to execute Haman because he had swindled the king, but the king instead executed Haman because he assaulted the queen.

Haman may have thought he could convince the king of his innocence, but he didn't get the chance when the king left the room, and so Haman turned his attention to Esther.

Esther wanted the king to reverse his irreversible decree, but instead the king allowed them to write another irreversible decree.

I think there is a lesson there for us. Sometimes our own plans will not work out as we had envisioned them. That does not mean we throw up our hands in defeat. What it means is that we keep trusting God and obeying God, and

we look for some other way to accomplish what he wants us to do. That is what we see repeatedly here in Esther.

Esther 8:11-13

11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey, 12 Upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar. 13 The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, and that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies.

“To destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish” in verse 11 is the same phrase found in Haman’s original decree (3:13), but here the Jews are the ones doing the destroying rather than being the target of the destruction. The Jews here are being allowed by the king to defend themselves against anyone that might assault them.

The two decrees operated together to create in effect a legalized civil war between the Jews in Persia and the Persians hostile to the Jews. Again, we are forced to consider Mordecai’s refusal to honor Haman, and how that refusal looks in light of the command in Jeremiah to the exiles.

Jeremiah 29:7 – And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the LORD for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

“Seek the peace. ... In the peace thereof shall ye have peace.” We are not seeing any peace here in Esther 8. Instead, Mordecai has caused a civil war!

The Jews were allowed to fight any Persians who would assault them. How many such Persians were there?

The number of Persians hostile to the Jews may have decreased now that Haman was dead and now that Queen Esther was known to be a Jew, but as we will soon see, some such Persians certainly remained.

We know why Haman the Agagite wanted to destroy the Jews, but what about all of the other Persians? What explains their hatred of the Jews?

As look back through history, while the hostility may be difficult to explain, it is hardly surprising. It seems that the Jews have always been surrounded by those who are hostile and who seek their destruction - both in Biblical times and in post-Biblical times. Perhaps there were other Amalekites in Persia, or others who had past dealings with the Jews, or perhaps Haman's decree had created much of the enmity by offering the Persians "an irresistible opportunity to scavenge among the defenseless and dispossessed Jews."

There is something of a letdown in this outcome: after more than two months of deliberation, is this the best they could come up with? Couldn't the Jews have defended themselves even without such an edict? That may be how it looks on the surface, but this second decree is not as empty as it might first appear.

The chief provision of the second edict is to give the Jews the right to "assemble" ("gather themselves together" in the KJV). The Hebrew term for "assemble" often means to muster an army. The Jews are given permission in verse 11 to form armies to defend themselves against anyone who dares to attack them. Without such official sanction, the process of assembling an army would have been viewed as an act of rebellion.

As before, the decree is publicized throughout the empire. Anyone who might be tempted to follow the first edict would now know that the Jews had permission to fight back and would be ready to defend themselves.

Who are the women and the children in verse 11? Are they the women and the children of the Jews, or are they the women and the children of those who would attack the Jews?

Some argue that the "women and children" are part of the compound direct object of the verb "attack," which would mean that the decree is giving the Jews permission to destroy any armed forces that would attack the Jewish

women and Jewish children. But apparently that is a minority view among Hebrew scholars, with most arguing that the text gives the Jews permission to destroy the women and children of any who would attack them.

This second view has been called the “almost unanimous” and “standard, almost universally accepted” view, and it does seem to make more sense from the context. Why? Because then the second edict would be giving the Jews the same power that had been pronounced against them in 3:13.

“The text needs to be interpreted as it stands, rather than be watered down to accommodate modern moral standards.”

But should we be troubled by the fact that the Jews sought and were given permission to kill women and children?

Here is how one commentary describes where we are in verse 11:

“Israel’s salvation involves no inviolable law, no direct divine action, no return to a promised land, no holiness that imitates the character of God. Instead it involves guile and wits, luck and opportunism, good timing and, when the moment comes, ruthless use of violent force.”

While that may be a bit harsh, is it wrong? Is verse 11 really inviting God’s people to engage in the “ruthless use of violent force”?

First, having permission to kill women and children and doing so are two different things, and later, when the body count is given, only “men” are mentioned (9:6, 15). (Although, the final count of 75,000 dead in 9:16 refers more generally to “enemies.”) Mordecai’s decree also gave the Jews permission to keep the plunder, but we will be told three times in Chapter 9 that the Jews did not take any plunder.

Second, remember that Haman had authorized the Persians to kill the Jewish women and children in 3:13. That is, Haman the Agagite tried to destroy the Jews in the same manner that the Jews now sought to destroy them. There would have been a serious imbalance (possibly affecting the outcome) if one side had the power to kill women and children while the other side did not.

Third, we need to remember the historical basis for this conflict with Haman the Agagite. God's command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3 also mentioned women and children: "Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man **and woman, infant and suckling**, ox and sheep, camel and ass."

King Saul had been commanded to destroy the women and the children of the Amalekites. Haman's decree had attempted to reverse God's own decree of destruction against the Amalekites by applying it instead against the Jews. Would God himself be reversed in this book of reversals?

Did God really order Saul to kill the women and the children? Yes, he did – and Saul was punished when he disobeyed that order. And if Saul had obeyed that command, Haman might not have been around to cause trouble for God's people hundreds of years later.

And this situation here is not unique in the Bible – women and children also perished in the flood. In fact, every young child on earth at that time perished in the flood.

Although it may be hard for those who are suffering to discern the difference, there is a big difference between suffering because you are being punished for an evil action and suffering as a consequence of someone else's evil action.

When people ask why God allows suffering, they are referring to suffering in the second category – suffering that comes as a consequence of evil rather than suffering as punishment for evil.

Why does God allow suffering as a consequence of evil? Because God has given us free will and because man has used that free will to rebel against God – you put those two things together - free will and rebellion - and suffering is the inevitable result. Suffering comes from free will. Could God eliminate all suffering in this world - yes, but only at the expense of our free will. And it is God's will that man have free will, and so we suffer in this life.

What does the Bible say about this distinction? The Bible is very clear that suffering as punishment is limited to the one who deserves the punishment. For example, both men and babies died in the flood – they both suffered, and yet the men were suffering due to punishment for their wickedness, while the babies were suffering as a consequence of their parents' wickedness. How do I know that?

Deuteronomy 24:16 – The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin.

Jeremiah 31:29-30 – In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But every one shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge.

Ezekiel 18:20 – The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

Jeremiah tells us that this principle is true under the New Covenant, and Deuteronomy and Ezekiel tell us it was also true under the Old Covenant.

The people of Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's day were confused about this – they thought they were being punished for the sins of their parents. They were not; instead, they were suffering the consequences of the sins of their parents.

Our God is a just God – and a just God does not punish me for something someone else did. Does that mean I won't suffer because of what someone else did? No – that sort of suffering is inescapable in this world.

LESSON 29

Last week, when we ended, we were looking at the royal permission the Jews had requested and had received to kill the women and children of their enemies in Esther 8:11.

As we saw, this part of the second edict not only paralleled the same language in the first edict, but also paralleled the same language in God's command to King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:3.

And last week we looked at the key distinction between suffering as punishment for sin versus suffering as a consequence of sin. God does not punish us for the sins of others, but that does not mean we will be spared from suffering as a consequence of the sin of others. Children suffered and perished in the great flood, but they were not being punished by that flood.

What about punishment for sin today? Does God punish people today (present tense) for the sins they commit? Yes. How do I know that? Paul and Peter both tell us about it.

Romans 13:3-4 – For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; **for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.**

1 Peter 2:14 – Or unto governors, **as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers**, and for the praise of them that do well.

And, of course, we all suffer today from the consequences of the sin that we see all around us.

Many people have struggled with the commands from God in the Old Testament to kill women and children. I know of one well-known gospel preacher who left the church, taking his family with him, because he said he could not reconcile the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New.

Do I understand all there is to know about the commands by God in the Old Testament to kill children? No, I do not, and I don't think anyone else does either. But there is one thing I understand perfectly and completely about such commands – they must be viewed in the light of Jesus Christ and in the light of God's love for the world in sending his only begotten son to die on a cross. If God commanded it, then it was good and it was part of God's plan to bless the entire world through Jesus Christ. That much I know with absolute certainty.

If anyone is struggling to understand something about God in the Old Testament, your answer lies in the New Testament.

2 Corinthians 1:20 - For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Not only did Jesus rise from the dead – Jesus changed the meaning of suffering and death. Trying to understand suffering and death in the Old Testament apart from Jesus in the New Testament is a hopeless effort. No one understands suffering and death more than Jesus does.

Why the command to kill everyone in 1 Samuel and why the similar language here in Esther?

In both cases, the continuance of God's plan of redemption was at risk. God was working to bring a worldwide blessing through the Jewish people, and no one and nothing could be allowed to stop that plan. God saw the Amalekites as a threat, and God commanded their total destruction. That command was not obeyed, and, as a result, God's people were once again on the brink of extinction due to the Amalekites. Anyone who doubts the wisdom of God's command to Saul needs to look at the book of Esther to see what came as a result of disobedience to that command.

The ancient enmity between the Jews and the Amalekites is an underlying theme throughout this book. We may look at that enmity with disdain – there they go again fighting a war that is centuries old. But doesn't the church have its own ancient enemies? Aren't we also surrounded by Agagites? The ancient

Amalekites wanted nothing more than to wipe God's people off the face of the earth – aren't there people today with exactly that same desire?

Haman the Agagite is with us still, and one need only turn on the TV set to see him. He is seeking our destruction. We must fight back, not with carnal weapons, but with the sword of the Spirit and by remaining faithful and true to Jesus, the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23).

The phrase "avenge themselves" in verse 13 is significant. The Hebrew word used there "everywhere designates a punitive action and presupposes a prior wrong, that is, some offense to which the avenging party is responding." This decree is not giving the Jews carte blanche to do away with anyone they don't like. We need to keep this point in mind when later we will see Queen Esther ask the King for a second day of slaughter.

Esther 8:14-17

14 So the posts that rode upon mules and camels went out, being hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment. And the decree was given at Shushan the palace. 15 And Mordecai went out from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a garment of fine linen and purple: and the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. 16 The Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour. 17 And in every province, and in every city, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a good day. And many of the people of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews fell upon them.

Why the great urgency in verse 14 to get this second decree out? After all, the day of attack under Haman's decree is still nine months away, and according to Herodotus it took only three months for a message to circulate throughout the entire empire using the famous Persian postal system. Why the rush?

Most likely the urgency was because it would take time for the Jews to assemble their army, plus it was important for all of the Jews to know that their situation was no longer hopeless. Some of the Jews may have been preparing to flee – perhaps even to join the exiles in Jerusalem. They needed to know as quickly as possible that the tables had turned!

But there is yet another reason for the urgency – each detail shows how Mordecai and his decree do not merely parallel Haman and his decree, but they do it one better.

- Xerxes gives Haman the signet ring only when he needs to authorize a decree (3:10), but Mordecai receives it right from the start.
- Haman’s decree goes forth by couriers (3:13), while Mordecai’s goes forth by couriers mounted on special royal steeds.
- Haman’s decree goes out in “haste” (3:15), but Mordecai’s decree goes out with “urgent haste.”

Mordecai has triumphed over Haman in every possible way! Even his edict is better!

Mordecai is greatly honored by the king, and the Jews rejoice everywhere that this second edict is announced. They must have been very worried about the first edict, and we can imagine their relief when the second edict was read. They may have even thought that the second edict meant that no one would attack them, but if so they were about to be disappointed.

The “crown” in verse 15 was really a turban, and, along with the other clothes, it showed Mordecai’s important position in the government. The text is making the point that the honor Mordecai received went far beyond anything that Haman had ever received.

The parallel structure of Esther is really on display here. The original decree had caused great mourning among the Jews, but the second decree causes great rejoicing. After the original decree, Mordecai was clothed with sackcloth and could not come before the king. With the second decree, Mordecai wears royal garments and comes from the presence of the king.

Mordecai’s new clothes illustrate his new status. As we noted earlier, a change of clothing in Esther typically indicates a change of position.

Xerxes' earlier command in 6:11 to clothe Mordecai in Xerxes' own robe now seems almost prophetic. The honor he received at that time foreshadowed the honor he now receives from the king.

When Mordecai had heard of Haman's decree, he had taken off his garments and clothed himself in sackcloth (4:1). Dressed that way, he could not enter into the king's gate (4:2). Now, when Mordecai issues his own decree, he is clothed in splendor, and he can stand in the very presence of the king.

The four words in verse 16 – light, gladness, joy, and honor – are the antithesis of the four words found in 4:3 – mourning, fasting, weeping, and wailing. God's people have experienced a dramatic reversal! And, in keeping with one of the book's major themes, the Jews celebrate that reversal in verse 17 with a feast.

Verse 17 tells us that many Persians "declared themselves Jews" or "became Jews." What does that mean?

The Hebrew word used here occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and its meaning is widely debated. It appears to be the Hebrew equivalent of a verb that literally means "to Hellenize" (that is, to act like a Greek). "To Hellenize" could simply mean "to speak Greek," or it could mean a deeper adoption of Greek customs and values. The same ambiguity applies to the term "became Jews." (The Septuagint, without any justification, adds "and were circumcised" – but if true that would seem to settle the question of their sincerity.)

So what does it mean that they became Jews? We have seen this before. God's promise to Abraham had been the promise of a worldwide blessing, and some Gentiles had become proselytes and declared themselves Jews prior to this time. We can read about it elsewhere in the Old Testament, and we can also see it from a careful study of the genealogical lists.

Why did it happen here? Most likely they had seen the dramatic reversals in these events as must having come from a divine source – the very fact that the reader of this book has been invited to see over and over. Perhaps these Persians had simply had, what one commentary called, "a public perception of

divine involvement.” Romans 1:20 tells us that the wonders of God’s creation should have that same effect on everyone.

The Persians certainly knew at least two things – they had a first edict from Haman, who was now dead, and they had a second edict from Mordecai, who was very much alive and who was very powerful.

The Jews were now on top, and that may have caused many in Persia to suddenly want to join in with them. These Persians may have been identifying themselves with the Jews because they saw some personal gain in doing so.

The later rabbis compared these converts to the “lion proselytes” of Samaria who adopted the Jewish faith only because of their fear of the lions that God sent to punish idolaters in the land (2 Kings 17:24-28).

But another possible reason for their conversion is that perhaps they had seen in Esther and Mordecai a faith and trust in one God – and that faith and trust stood in stark contrast with the vanity and misery of their own polytheism. We see the same thing in the New Testament where pagans were drawn to the power of the gospel. Pagan religions offer nothing but disappointment and disillusionment.

I fear that sometimes we think paganism is a thing of the past – an ancient false religion that is no longer a problem in our modern world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Satan would love for us to believe that paganism is dead – but it is alive and well. Men worship nature more today than they ever did in the past. Men worship more false gods now than ever before.

While the nature of the “conversion” is uncertain, its significance is clear. First, it represents yet another example of the “reversal” theme. Early in these events, Esther had to conceal her Jewishness – most likely out of fear. Now, it is the Gentiles who are afraid, and they try to hide their non-Jewishness.

What is the “fear” in verse 17? Is it fear of God? We are not told. The Hebrew word used here refers to a nearly debilitating fear, one that induces trembling. The word is used often for fear of God (Isaiah 2:10; 2 Chronicles 17:10), but it

is also used for the fear of the military might of Israel (Deuteronomy 2:25; 11:25).

Perhaps they simply feared the Jewish attack, but that attack was not directed at all Persians. Another view is that the Persians themselves noted the huge reversals that had occurred and were still occurring – and they at last understood who was behind those reversals. Perhaps verse 17 is the clearest reference to God in a book that never directly mentions God. Of what were the Persians afraid – just the Jews, or did Persia at last see the power behind the Jews?

We know Haman was an Amalekite, as were his sons, but we don't know who else was an Amalekite. But for those Amalekites who remained, this fear of God was a big reversal for them. Remember how they were described in Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 25:17-18 – Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; **and he feared not God.**

The descendants of Amalek had experienced a complete reversal!

Esther 9:1-2

Now in the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put in execution, in the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them, (though it was turned to the contrary, that the Jews had rule over them that hated them;) 2 The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt: and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people.

The day for the attack against the Jews finally comes in verse 1. The month of Adar would correspond to February or March, likely around 473 BC. (If so, Xerxes would himself be killed about 8 years later.)

It has been nine months since the second edict (which 8:9 tells us was in the third month). What happened during those nine months? We aren't told, but what happens here in Chapter 9 suggests that Haman's plan had either created or fanned the flames of anti-Semitism, and now thousands of Persians were eagerly awaiting the appointed day when they could attack the Jews. But now, of course, the Jews had royal permission to create an army and fight back.

What is Mordecai thinking about all of this? Does he have any regret about not showing any honor to Haman? If peacekeepers are blessed, what is Mordecai?

Haman had cast his lot almost a year ago to choose the month and the day, but Haman did not live to see that day. Instead, he experienced a big reversal. Haman is gone, but his edict remains. But that edict was not alone. A second edict had gone out giving the Jews permission to defend themselves.

You should circle a key phrase in verse 1 – “it was turned to the contrary” or “the reverse occurred.” (Another translation says “the tables were turned.”) There in a nutshell is the theme of the entire book of Esther.

The Hebrew word is emphatic and denotes a complete turnaround of fortunes such as when a curse becomes a blessing. The Hebrew word can literally mean “to flip over.” God's people were on the bottom, but now they are on the top. Here are some others verses where that same word is used:

2 Kings 21:13 – And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down.

Hosea 7:8 – Ephraim, he hath mixed himself among the people; Ephraim is a cake not turned.

The same Hebrew root word is found in Deuteronomy 32.

Deuteronomy 32:20 – And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward (twisted) generation, children in whom is no faith.

Why is that last reference significant? Because it may be that the entire theme of reversal in Esther is pointing us back to that one verse from Deuteronomy 32.

God's people had reversed themselves away from God, which was why they were now in exile. They had once been on the right path, but they had turned around.

The book of Esther shows us that God is the master of reversals, and that God could use great reversals to bless his people even while they were suffering as exiles. It reminds us once again of Joseph.

Genesis 50:20 – But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

But how is Deuteronomy 32:20 connected with the book of Esther? How does Deuteronomy 32:20 describe God?

Deuteronomy 32:20 – And he said, I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very froward (twisted) generation, children in whom is no faith.

Notice that first phrase: "I will hide my face from them." And where is God in the book of Esther? God is never named in the book. In a sense, God is hiding his face in the book of Esther.

God's people had turned away from God, and God had hidden his face from them, but even then God loved them, and God was working on their behalf. Like the father of the prodigal son, God was looking for his people to return, and God was working on their behalf.

As we have seen, the book of Esther is a textbook about God's providence. Yes, God is not mentioned, but God is working all throughout the book to deliver his people and to provide for his people.

And here is a key point - God's people are also working! At no point do we see them just sitting down and waiting for God to do all the work. In fact, and

perhaps to really drive home that point, we are not told that God does anything in this book. The focus is on what God's people are doing.

And what do we see here in Chapter 9 about what God's people are doing? What do we see here about the role that they are playing? We see two main things here in Chapter 9 - vigilance and obedience.

First, they were vigilant. They did not sit down to rest when Haman died, and they did not sit down to rest when the second edict was written. Instead, the fight continued, and we see that fight here in Chapter 9.

Second, they were obedient. They understood that King Saul's disobedience had brought them to this point, and they were not going to make that same mistake again.

But the fact that God is not mentioned forces us to consider another question - were the Jews on their own here? Some commentators think so:

"They employ astonishing wit and courage but at no stage explicitly look to God to visit them in their distress. When they attain power it is not because of their witness to the God of Israel but because of a sequence of blunders by their enemies and their own opportunistic ability to manipulate those around them."

Were they on their own? Had God given up on them, or perhaps was God concerned instead with those who had returned to Jerusalem by this time? And if we are asking that question, don't we think the Jews in Persia were also asking it?

The book of Esther **could** have been written to explicitly answer that question by mentioning God all throughout and by showing us everything that God was doing, but the book does **not** do that. Instead, I think the book is inviting us all to ask that same question - were the Jews on their own here? Is this book a testimony to what **they** did, or is it a testimony to what **God** did?

And that question is not confined to the book of Esther. One reason why Esther is such a modern book is that the question it presents is the same question we

may sometimes have - are we on our own? And the answer is also the same - we are NOT on our own!

Verse 1 says that “the enemies of the Jews hoped to have power over them.” A theme we have seen in this book is the ability or inability to exert power over another.

- Xerxes **could not** get Vashti to appear before him.
- Haman **could not** get Mordecai to bow down.
- Xerxes **could** get Haman to honor Mordecai.
- Esther **could** get the king and Haman to come to her banquets.
- Esther **could** get the king to execute Haman.
- Esther **could not** get the king to overturn his first edict.
- Esther **could** get the king to allow a second edict.

Over and over, the power comes and the power goes. Who has power over whom? Who is the ultimate power? Certainly not King Xerxes, even though he was supposedly the most powerful person on earth at the time.

LESSON 30

The end of verse 1 says that “the Jews had rule over them that hated them.” Here the word “hated” refers to hatred in action. We see a similar usage in Deuteronomy 30.

Deuteronomy 30:7 – And the LORD thy God will put all these curses upon thine enemies, and on them that hate thee, which persecuted thee.

This hatred was more than just an emotion – these haters were actively seeking to harm the Jews. They were acting on their emotion of hatred.

Verse 2 makes it clear that the Jews destroyed only those who sought to destroy them. That means they sought to destroy only those who physically attacked them, and not merely those who wished them harm. The Jews’ intention was not to go on a murderous rampage, but rather was to wreak vengeance on their attackers, or at least on those who were planning to attack them.

Verse 2 also shows that the Jews, as a whole, had, like Esther, undergone a transformation. No one could stand against the Jews because the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. Why the great fear?

Perhaps it was because the people now saw that the Jews had some favor and protection from the king. Or perhaps it was because the people now knew that Queen Esther was a Jew. Or perhaps it was because the people understood that there was power behind the scenes working on behalf of the Jews. And perhaps it was because the Jews themselves had become emboldened and encouraged when they recognized the hand of God at work in these events.

Esther 9:3-4

3 And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews; because the fear of Mordecai fell

upon them. 4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater.

Verse 3 tells us that the Persian officials helped the Jews because they feared Mordecai, who was growing more and more powerful. And, unlike with Haman, the Persians apparently needed no order from the king to fear Mordecai.

It is amazing, both then and now, how fast the political winds can change. And then, as now, power draws politicians like moths to a flame. These same officials had, no doubt, been Haman's greatest admirers not too long ago; now they were proud members of the Mordecai fan club! And, in verse 4, Mordecai's fame spreads all throughout Persia.

The verb translated "helped" in verse 3 literally means "to lift, bear, or carry." The same verb was used in Esther 3:1 to describe the promotion of Haman. Once again, we see a reversal: previously it was Haman who was lifted up by the king (and later lifted up on the gallows by that same king!), but now it is the Jews who are lifted up.

Verse 4 tells us that "this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater." These descriptions may be an allusion back to another great deliverer of God's people.

Exodus 11:3 – And the LORD gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people.

If Mordecai is being compared with Moses, then that allusion serves another purpose – it suggests a parallel between the commemoration of the feast of Purim (established in this book) and that of Passover, which is the subject of Exodus 11. Both feasts celebrate a great deliverance.

Esther 9:5-11

5 Thus the Jews smote all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and slaughter, and destruction, and did what they would unto those that hated

them. 6 And in Shushan the palace the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men. 7 And Parshandatha, and Dalphon, and Aspatha, 8 And Poratha, and Adalia, and Aridatha, 9 And Parmashta, and Arisai, and Aridai, and Vajezatha, 10 The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew they; but on the spoil laid they not their hand. 11 On that day the number of those that were slain in Shushan the palace was brought before the king.

The words in verse 5 – slaughter and destruction – parallel the words in the two decrees.

Verse 5 also tells us that the Jews “did what they would unto those that hated them.” That is, the Jews did as they pleased with those who hated them. That phrase (“did as they pleased”) is important because it highlights the reversal between this outcome and the outcome that Haman had planned for the Jews.

Esther 3:11 - And the king said to Haman, “The money is given to you, the people also, **to do with them as it seems good to you.**”

Haman had been told by the king that he could do as he pleased with the Jews, but in the end it was the Jews who did as they pleased with the Persians who attacked them.

The phrase “in Susa the palace” in verse 6 is emphasized by its placement at the beginning of the verse. Why the emphasis? Because the text is acknowledging the very unusual circumstances that would allow the killing of so many people right outside the king’s palace. Kings typically did not like that sort of activity to occur anywhere near them.

That only 500 men in Susa were killed by the Jews tells us that most Persians (at least in Susa) did not attack the Jews. (But later we will see that 75,000 were killed elsewhere.)

Why were Haman’s sons killed?

Most likely they were among those enemies who were seeking to harm the Jews. That is certainly suggested by the context in verse 5. The 500 Persians killed in Susa may have even been led by the 10 sons of Haman who are named in verses 7-9.

As one commentary notes, it was inevitable that Haman's sons would be killed. They had lost their inheritance when the king gave away Haman's house in 8:1, and they were, no doubt, causing trouble now that Haman's big day had arrived. I suspect that Haman's sons had been looking forward to this day more than anyone else.

And, of course, it was also a prudent political action that would prevent Haman's descendants from taking vengeance against the Jews as Haman, a descendant of King Agag, had attempted to do earlier in this same book!

The death of his 10 sons also serves to demonstrate Haman's total defeat. In Esther 5:11, Haman bragged to his wife and friends about his riches, his many sons, and all the ways the king had promoted him.

Each of those sources of pride has now been stripped away from Haman and given over to the Jews: his riches were given to Esther in 8:1; his promotions given to Mordecai in 8:2; and now his sons, too, have fallen into the hands of the Jews. With the death of his sons, Haman's downfall is complete.

The names of Haman's sons provide us some more evidence of the authenticity of the book of Esther. How?

In ancient times, it was common practice in many lands for parents to give their children names that incorporated the name of a deity. Haman's sons bear names that incorporate the names of Persian deities. The deities referenced here were still worshiped as gods by some Persians in the time of Xerxes, but as Zoroastrianism took hold in the realm (during the days of Xerxes' successor Artaxerxes I), these same Persian deities came to be regarded as demons. And so, these names reflect the language of the era of Xerxes rather than that of his successors, which is evidence that this book is historical fact and also that it was not written a long time after the events that it describes.

In the earliest Hebrew texts, the sons of Haman are listed in two parallel columns (with the names in one column and the conjunctions in the other column), and rabbis and commentators have speculated about it ever since.

(See the handout. The manuscript on the right is from the Leningrad Codex, the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible. It dates to around AD 1000.)

Why are those names written that way?

Some suggest that was the way they were hanged on the gallows. Others suggest it shows that God's enemies had been set apart for destruction. A similar arrangement of names is found in the list of conquered Canaanite kings in Joshua 12:9-24.

"It is as if the author wants the reader to ponder each name, for with each death comes the final blow to Haman's pride."

At the reading of the Esther scroll on Purim, the names are recited in a single breath, to illustrate the contempt in which Haman and his lineage was held among the Jews.

The text unexpectedly tells us three times that the Jews did not lay their hand on any plunder. Why is that unexpected? Because the second edict – written by Mordecai – specifically allowed for the taking of plunder by the Jews.

It must have been very important that no plunder was taken because we are told that three times. Why was it important that no plunder be taken?

First, it was important for the Persians to know that the Jews were just defending themselves – the Jews, unlike Haman, were not motivated by material gain. In short, not taking any plunder would show the Persians that God's people were different from the other peoples that surrounded them.

"The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and remembered and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities."

One commentary described the repeated statements about plunder as "an explicit nudge to the reader," and I agree. I think the text is telling us that, despite the horrific things the Jews were given permission to do, this is not all

about the Jews becoming like the other nations. The Jews were different even when they had royal permission not to be!

Second, in not taking plunder, the Jews were pointing us all back to a key event in the life of Abraham. After Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek in Genesis 14, the king of Sodom offered Abraham the goods that had been recovered in battle. But Abraham did not take them. Instead, we read:

Genesis 14:22-23 - But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'

If that event is a backdrop here in Esther 9, then once again the reader is being invited to see the Jews' faith in God and their reliance on God.

Third, in not taking plunder, the Jews were fulfilling God's command to Saul regarding the Amalekites (although the only Amalekites we know about for sure are Haman and his sons, and they are all now dead), and, unlike Saul, they would not disobey that command by taking plunder. Remember what Samuel said to King Saul:

1 Samuel 15:19 - "Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?"

Saul had pounced on the spoil! The Jews were not going to do that here. Perhaps they were also remembering Achan in Joshua 7 and how he brought destruction on the people by keeping plunder.

By not taking any plunder, the Jews were doing something here that we do not see them doing very often in the Bible - they were learning from their mistakes! The Jews of Persia obeyed God where King Saul had disobeyed God.

If we are looking for God in the book of Esther, he is pretty easy to see right here. Why else would the Jews not take the plunder? What reason could there be other than their faith and reliance on God?

Given that, it is again very odd that the decree – written by Mordecai – permitted plunder in the first place. Was Mordecai really motivated here by a desire to obey where Saul had disobeyed? If so, why did Mordecai include a plunder provision in his decree? Again, we aren't told.

But the simplest explanation may be the best - if the order had not permitted plunder, then certainly no inference about the Jews could be drawn from their failure to take plunder. It is only because plunder was permitted that we are now asking why the Jews did not take plunder.

Also, as with the permission to kill the women and the children, it was important that the two decrees be balanced - that each side would have the same permission as the other side to inflict damage.

I mentioned that Haman and his sons are the only Amalekites we know about here, but that is not how the Jews view these events. Jewish tradition has just about everyone in Persia being an Amalekite. They say that all of those killed were Amalekites, and that they represented "all the chiefs of the house of Amalek," but the inspired text does not tell us that.

Note also that the text here says nothing about the killing of women and children, although (as we discussed) Mordecai's edict gave the Jews the right to do so (Esther 8:11). The text makes special note of the fact that the Jews departed from the express words of the decree by taking no spoils, but it says nothing about them not killing women and children.

Should we assume, then, that the Jews did kill women and children? Were some of Haman's ten sons still children when they were killed? There is no indication in the text that Haman was an old man, and in those days, a man would continue to father children as long as he could. Again, we are not told – and while the body count in verse 6 is of the "men," the silence on that issue in verses 7-9 may be telling.

Esther 9:12-15

12 And the king said unto Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in Shushan the palace, and the ten sons of Haman; what have they done in the rest of the king's provinces? now what is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: or what is thy request further? and it shall be done. 13 Then said Esther, If it please the king, let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow also according unto this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged upon the gallows. 14 And the king commanded it so to be done: and the decree was given at Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons. 15 For the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month Adar, and slew three hundred men at Shushan; but on the prey they laid not their hand.

What is the king thinking in verse 12? Is he worried that so many had been killed so close to where he himself now was? Is he upset by it? Is he concerned? Is he angry? Is he astonished? Does he admire the Jews' victory? We don't know.

The king informs Esther about the 500 deaths in Susa and about the deaths of Haman's 10 sons, and he wonders what must have taken place in the other provinces. He also asks Esther what she wants now – although this time there is no mention of half his kingdom.

Some suggest the king's question should be read, "Surely in light of what you have achieved, you can't want anything more!" But Esther does want something more. Esther wants a second day of fighting in Susa, and she wants the bodies of Haman's 10 dead sons to be hanged on the gallows.

A detail that seems to have escaped many commentators is why Esther is with the king here in the first place. The queen was not in the habit of lingering in the king's presence, and the king was not in the habit of summoning her. Why are they together in verse 12?

Evidently, the reason Esther is with the king now is because she has come before him once again as a supplicant. Certainly, that is how Xerxes interprets her presence, because he asks her to present her petition in verse 12. (Xerxes

couldn't get Vashti to appear in Chapter 1 – and now he can't seem to get Esther to disappear!)

Esther's request has caused some controversy among commentators. She asks the king to let the fighting continue for another day in Susa, and she asks that the bodies of Haman's 10 already dead sons be hanged on the gallows for all to see.

Here is how some commentators have described Esther's request:

- “For this horrible request no justification can be found.”
- Esther's request shows that she was “a deceitful and bloodthirsty woman.”
- Esther “had begun to feel the heady intoxication of the power she has so remarkably attained.”
- “Esther seems harder, blunter, even cruel.”
- Esther's request to hang the dead bodies of Haman's sons is “a case of her malignant spirit of vengeance pursuing them even after death.”

Before we ask why Esther made these two requests, we should first note that her requests are granted without hesitation. For whatever it is worth, the queen's requests do not seem to have been a shock to the king. He grants them at once in verse 14.

Haman's ten sons, killed the day before, are impaled in a public demonstration to serve as a deterrent to others. To any who might have had doubts, it is now graphically clear to all that Haman's ambitions have come to nothing. Haman's lineage has been cut off; his house has been left destitute. The fate that Mordecai had warned might come upon Esther (Esther 4:14) has instead befallen Haman.

But why was the fighting in Susa to continue for a second day? After all, under Haman's original decree the Persians could not lawfully have attacked the Jews on the second day, and so the Jews did not need to defend themselves

on that second day. Why did Esther request that the fighting continue another day?

Had Esther turned vindictive? She provides no justification to the king for the request, and he doesn't ask for one. She makes no mention of the welfare of her people.

Mordecai is not mentioned as being in on this request, which may suggest Esther is acting on her own. Had the power gone to her head? What was Esther thinking? As usual, we aren't told.

So why the continued fighting? The wording of Esther's request is the key to understanding the reason for the second day of fighting - "let it be granted to the Jews which are in Shushan to do to morrow **also according unto this day's decree.**"

Esther asks that the Jews (only in Susa) be allowed to do for a second day as they had done on the first day. The same rules would apply on this second day as had applied on the first day: the Jews would be permitted to kill anyone who attacked them.

Given the carnage that the Jews had just visited on their enemies, it seems reasonable that survivors might seek revenge, whatever the law would allow. In fact, in an honor-driven culture, it would be their responsibility to do seek revenge. A royal edict allowing a second day of violent self-defense would serve as a deterrent against any such reprisals.

Another factor that may play into Esther's request for the second day of killing is the backdrop of the Jewish-Amalekite struggle. In 1 Samuel 15, the Israelites had failed to carry out God's instructions to utterly annihilate the Amalekites. Now, that failure had come back to haunt the Jews in the person of Haman and his evil decree. This time, the Jews were going to make sure that their enemies were destroyed utterly.

Perhaps some Amalekites had survived the first day. Haman had been a very powerful person in the empire, and he may yet have had allies in the empire

just waiting for their opportunity to carry out his evil plans. A big clue to the reason for Esther's request for more fighting is Esther's request that the bodies of the 10 sons of Haman be publicly exposed to serve, no doubt, as a warning to others - especially to other Amalekites.

I think Esther was not being vindictive or bloodthirsty – Esther was being wise. She knew with whom she was dealing, and she was not going to make the mistake of underestimating her enemy.

Why only in Susa? Perhaps that was only where the Amalekites lived, but more likely it was the practical reason that word of a second day of fighting would not be able to reach the provinces in time to make any difference.

On the second day of fighting, 300 additional men are killed in Susa, which shows that there were in fact some enemies who remained alive after the first day.

And this second day of fighting explains why the feast of Purim is celebrated on two consecutive days. The Jews referred to this second day as “Mordecai Day” (which is odd because Esther is the one who requested it).

LESSON 31

Esther 9:16-17

16 But the other Jews that were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, and stood for their lives, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes seventy and five thousand, but they laid not their hands on the prey, 17 On the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of the same rested they, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

Back in verse 12, the king wondered what had happened in the other Persian provinces. Now in verse 16, the king gets his answer.

Verse 16 tells us that 75,000 Persians had been killed by the Jews in all the king's provinces. That number seems very high to some commentators given that it was the size of a large city in those days.

It is possible that the word translated "thousands" may have meant families or clans, which, if so, would mean that the total number was much less than 75,000. Also, the Septuagint has 15,000 in place of 75,000. But the actual figure could be 75,000 – which, although high, is certainly not impossible.

These 75,000 were killed on the first day, and there was no second day of fighting in the provinces. The main reason for that, of course, was that Esther's request for a second day of fighting was limited to Susa. But even if she had asked for a second day of fighting in the provinces, word of the extension could not have reached any or many of the provinces in time to make any difference. And perhaps additional fighting did occur in the provinces but it was not reported back to the king.

Verse 16 tells us that the Jews had rest from their enemies. The word "rest" is a key word here, as it is throughout the Bible. The goal of this carnage was not revenge or plunder, but instead was rest. Rest had been a promise from long ago.

Deuteronomy 12:10 – But when ye go over Jordan, and dwell in the land which the LORD your God giveth you to inherit, and when he giveth you **rest** from all your enemies round about, so that ye dwell in safety.

But, of course, their disobedience (including King Saul’s disobedience with King Agag) had led to anything but rest.

The word “rest” here also provides an important link back to what happened with the Amalekites.

Deuteronomy 25:19 – Therefore it shall be, when the LORD thy God hath given thee **rest** from all thine enemies round about, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it, that thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven; thou shalt not forget it.

Amalek has, at last, now been blotted out. God’s people have been saved. And yet, God is not mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther. The text invites the reader to consider not only **how** God has done this great thing, but **whether** God has done this great thing. Yes, the outcome is consistent with God’s ancient edict regarding the Agagites, but what was God’s role in these events? That is left for the reader to decide.

When we consider our own questions about God’s providence in our own lives and God’s role in the world around us, we begin to see why Esther is such a modern book. Esther invites us to ponder the nature of faith in a world where God is unseen. It is faith that allows us to see the unseen reality behind the visible events of our day (2 Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:1). We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). The book of Esther shows us how that works.

The day of feasting and gladness in verse 17 is the first Purim celebration. At last we see why “feasting” is such an important theme in this book – the book of Esther explains the basis for the feast of Purim. A day of rest had become a day of feasting and joy. Elsewhere in the Bible, God is identified as the giver of rest to his people, but no such credit is given here.

Esther 9:18-22

18 But the Jews that were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day thereof, and on the fourteenth thereof; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. 19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another. 20 And Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters unto all the Jews that were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both nigh and far, 21 To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, 22 As the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

As we said, one reason why the book of Esther was written was to explain the origin of the feast of Purim, and these verses explain when and how that feast was to be celebrated.

One reason that Mordecai wrote the letters in verse 20 was to commend the celebrations and encourage their continuance each year. In the rural towns the Jews celebrated Purim on the 14th day of Adar, but in Susa they feasted on the 15th day of Adar because they had taken a second day of vengeance. Today, the only city in which Purim is celebrated on the 15th of Adar is Jerusalem.

In verse 20, Mordecai makes a written record of what has happened. We see something similar with regard to the ancient Amalekites.

Exodus 17:14 - Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."

In Exodus 17, God told Moses to write things down as memorial. Here in Esther 9, God is not mentioned, but a written record is done for remembrance and for a memorial.

Is there a contradiction between verse 19 and verse 21? Some commentators say yes. They say that verse 21 commands all Jews to observe two days of feasting, but verse 19 commands the Jews in unwalled towns to observe only one day of feasting. Is that a contradiction? Of course not! Common sense goes a long way in resolving most of the so-called Bible contradictions!

First, to state that Purim was celebrated on two days is not the same as saying that everyone was required to celebrate for two days.

Second, a basic canon of interpretation (still used by lawyers today!) is that a specific statement governs a general statement. The general statement is that Purim is a two-day feast, which it is. The specific statement is that some Jews celebrate one day while others celebrate on the other day, which they do. Both of those statements are completely true.

Verse 22 provides the two main reasons for the feast – relief and reversal. The Jews received relief or rest from their enemies’ plans against them, and they experienced a reversal as sorrow became gladness and mourning became a holiday.

In verse 22, we also see that in addition to all of the feasting and gift giving, the Jews gave gifts to the poor. Likewise, in Nehemiah 8:10-12, the people were instructed to celebrate the reading of the Law by feasting and sending portions of food to anyone who did not have anything available with which to celebrate.

Is there a book in the Bible in which we do not see God’s care and concern for the poor? If we are still looking for God in the book of Esther, the closing words of verse 22 may be the best place to look. Even here, where God is not mentioned by name, the poor are remembered.

Esther 9:23-28

23 And the Jews undertook to do as they had begun, and as Mordecai had written unto them; 24 Because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had devised against the Jews to destroy

them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them; 25 But when Esther came before the king, he commanded by letters that his wicked device, which he devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. 26 Wherefore they called these days Purim after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, 27 The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; 28 And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed.

These verses give a summary of the events that were behind the feast of Purim.

With this book, Purim joined the five Jewish feasts that were commanded by Moses. By the time of Jesus, Hanukkah had also been introduced to mark the deliverance of the Jews from the threatened religious and cultural annihilation by the Greeks under Antiochus Epiphanies in the second century BC.

The summary in verses 24-25 is interesting because it is written from a purely Persian perspective. Mordecai is not mentioned, and Esther is mentioned only in passing. Instead, it is the king who saves the day by writing the orders that leads to Haman's downfall and the end of his evil plot. There is no mention of the Jew's military efforts to secure their safety (or of the king's own role in being duped to sign that first evil edict!).

Why are these details omitted? Remember how this summary was used - it was a summary of what Mordecai had written in his letter to the Jews. Seen in that light, the lack of certain details is very understandable.

First, Mordecai would not have had to describe the fighting; the Jews would have been very familiar with it because they had just experienced it.

Second, the emphasis on the king's role is carefully designed to retain the king's favor, which we have seen elsewhere in this book. Just as Esther had

carefully avoided implying that the king might have been responsible for the Jews' predicament in 7:3-6, Mordecai goes her one better here and gives the king more credit for the Jews' deliverance than he actually deserves.

The word "purim" in the Old Testament occurs only in Esther. It came into Hebrew as an Akkadian loanword to which the Hebrew plural suffix "im" was added. The first time it was used was in Esther 3:7, where the text also gave us the Hebrew equivalent of the word (*goral*). This addition suggests that when Esther was written, the author did not expect all of his readers to be familiar with the word "purim."

The use of the Akkadian word in this text is odd, since the account is written in Hebrew and set in Persia, where the official languages were Aramaic and Persian. No commentary I read has a good explanation for how that word entered these events, but one suggested it may have simply been used because "Purim" sounds similar to "Haman," which in turn sounds similar to the Hebrew word for "destroy" used in verse 24. That is, it may have all been just a bit of word play.

Why is the plural word "purim" used when verse 24 tells us that Haman cast only "pur" – only a single lot? (Esther 3:7 told us the same thing.) We don't know for sure, but one commentary suggested that the text is implying there were actually two lots cast: Haman's and God's. Or perhaps Haman just cast the same lot twice - once for the day and once for the month.

Why is the feast named after the casting of lots? Most believe there is a double meaning – which fits well with all of the double events we saw in this book!

First, the obvious meaning is that the name "Purim" is a reminder that the fate of God's people was not to be decided by some pagan's random toss of the dice before his false gods.

But, second, in Psalm 16:5-6, David said that God had made his lot (*goral*) secure. And so the name of the feast recognizes that the fate of God's people is in God's hands – and God makes their way secure.

The Purim festival today is more of a Purim season.

It begins with a special Sabbath of Shekels (Shabbat Shekalim) right before the start of the month of Adar (our March time frame). On that day, the readings are focused on the giving of money.

Next, there is the Sabbath of Remembrance (Shabbat Zachor) immediately before the 14th of Adar. On that day, the Jews remember the enmity between themselves and the Amalekites.

On the 13th day of Adar, the Jews fast to remember the risk that Esther took on behalf of her people. At the conclusion of the fast, on the eve of Purim, the book of Esther is read in its entirety.

On the morning of Purim, the Esther scroll is read again, but this time the mood is much lighter. The children dress up as characters in the event, jokes are told, and songs are sung. Whenever Haman's name is mentioned, children make a loud noise using home-made noisemakers.

Two types of gifts are sent: food to family and friends, and charitable donations to the poor. The Talmud prescribes drinking on Purim until you can no longer tell the difference between "Mordecai be blessed!" and "Haman be cursed!"

As we said earlier, today it is only in Jerusalem (a walled city) that Purim is celebrated on the 15th day of Adar. All other Jews celebrate Purim on the 14th day.

The point of the feast of Purim is to serve as a reminder that unexpected reversals do happen in history – and they are more common than not for the people of God. Our fate is not determined by the casting of dice. We are a part of God's eternal plan and eternal purpose, and our fate is in God's hands. It is sad to consider that the people celebrating Purim today missed the greatest reversal of all when they rejected the Messiah.

There is a textual question about verse 25 that we should consider before we move on. Verse 25 in the KJV says, “But when **Esther** came before the king.” In the ESV, it says, “But when **it** came before the king.” Why the difference, and which is correct?

The pronoun used in verse 25 is feminine, but it can be translated as either “she” or “it.” The KJV assumes it should be “she,” and it then supplies the most likely person by inserting the name “Esther.” The problem with that insertion is that Esther is not mentioned in the immediately preceding verses, which means that the antecedent of the pronoun is being supplied just by the reader’s knowledge of what happened earlier.

The NIV says, “But when the **plot** came to the king’s attention.” That may actually make more sense here than Esther, but again the NIV (as it very often does) is trying to clarify an ambiguity in the original text. If the underlying text is ambiguous, a good translation should be ambiguous as well.

The ESV is perhaps the best translation of those three because it retains the underlying ambiguity better than the other two - although the best translation might be “she or it.” The Amplified Version includes both possibilities: “But when **Esther** brought the **matter** before the king...”

The reference in verse 27 to “all who joined them” may be another reference to the Persians who became Jews in response to all that they had seen. It may also be a reference to those who would later become Jews and then celebrate the feast.

Esther 9:29-32

29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority, to confirm this second letter of Purim. 30 And he sent the letters unto all the Jews, to the hundred twenty and seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth, 31 To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings

and their cry. 32 And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book.

Queen Esther was last mentioned by name back in verse 13, where she asked for a second day of slaughter. Verse 29 now shows Esther and Mordecai acting with “all authority” – which is quite a reversal from how this book began!

Verse 32 tells us that the command of Queen Esther was written in the book. Think back over all of the writings we have seen in this book. In fact, there is a distinct emphasis in Esther on the written word – which is another interesting parallel with our modern world in which God speaks to us only through his written word.

This writing in verse 32 likely also included the writings of Mordecai from verse 20, and was likely either the book of Esther itself or was used as a source by the author of Esther of the inspired text of the book (who may have been Mordecai himself).

In Chapter 8, we found the longest verse in the Bible (verse 9). Now, let’s look at the one of the shortest chapters in the Bible! (In fact, it is either the shortest or the second shortest outside of the Psalms depending on whether you go by word count or verse count. Job 25 has fewer words but more verses.

Esther 10:1-2

And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea. 2 And all the acts of his power and of his might, and the declaration of the greatness of Mordecai, whereunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

The book of Esther ends with a chapter that is focused on the greatness of God. No wait, that’s not right. The book of Esther ends with a chapter that is focused on the greatness of Mordecai!

And Esther? Not a word is said here about her. As one commentator said, “it is Mordecai who gets the last word.”

In the ancient Greek versions of the book of Esther, Mordecai's role throughout the text is amplified and Esther's role is diminished – which is additional evidence that the version we have was inspired by God while the Greek additions (which do not appear in our Bibles) were not. Why? Because God has no problem making a woman the hero, but the male editors who came along later definitely had a problem with that!

Earlier in this book we saw a tax holiday from the king, but not surprisingly the taxes are back again at the end of the book. (As we have said, Esther is a modern book!) Why are taxes mentioned in verse 1?

Perhaps Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps it showed God's blessings on this pagan king for his role in preserving the Jews (although this same king very nearly wiped them out due to his inept leadership). The references to taxes here may also be a very subtle reminder that the king had first tried to enrich himself by selling the people of God to Haman.

Verse 1 emphasizes the vastness of the king's reign. Just as Joseph's presence had blessed Pharaoh, Mordecai's presence has blessed Xerxes.

Those who argue that this book is fiction have some trouble with verse 2. Why? Because the author is telling his readers that they can consult the official government records to confirm the truthfulness of the full account. That would seem a strange addition to be included by an imposter!

Esther 10:3

3 For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed.

Verse 3 contrasts Mordecai with Haman.

In Chapter 3, it was Haman who held the seat of honor higher than all the other nobles – and now Haman is on a gallows higher than all of the other gallows, and Mordecai is in his place before the king.

Haman had been self-centered and self-indulgent, but Mordecai seeks the welfare of others. Haman was committed to evil and destruction, while Mordecai was committed to goodness and peace.

Why was Mordecai so highly esteemed? Two reasons are given – “he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.”

First, Mordecai worked for the welfare of God’s people. He was not focused on his own welfare or that of his physical family, but he was focused on the welfare of his spiritual family.

Second, Mordecai spoke peace to all his people. He was not afraid to stand up and speak on behalf of his people and to his people.

We have been pretty hard on poor Mordecai throughout our study of this book, and perhaps the final verse is telling us that Mordecai was really a good guy after all! Or at least that everyone thought he was!

Mordecai, it seems, combined service to the king with service to his people, and he was able to do both without compromise. Mordecai could serve as a mediator between the king and his people, and it is just as reassuring for us today as it was then to know that there is someone with the ear of the king who has our best interests at heart.

A Few Closing Comments

We have seen many themes running through the book of Esther: reversal, feasting, clothing, honor, power, authority.

But the theme of reversal is the central theme of the book of Esther. And that theme of reversal, as we have said, is not limited to Esther, but is a theme of the entire Bible.

Few books in the Bible are more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel than the book of Esther. As we said in the introduction, in some ways Esther is the most modern book in the Old Testament. God provides for his

people in Esther as he provides for his people today – through his loving providential care. We do not see visible angels or explicit miracles, but the hand of God is unmistakable to those who see with the eyes of faith. And through the two themes of reversal and feasting we see the two sides of God’s providence - that which God does, and that which we do.

We have a role to play in God’s providence, and nowhere is that more clear than in the book of Esther, where God is not mentioned. The role that we must play reminds me of a story about a man trapped on his roof during a terrible flood. When the water was up to the first floor windows, a boat came by and offered the man a ride to safety, but the man said, “No. God will provide.” When the water was up the second floor windows, a second boat came by and offered the man a ride to safety, but the man said, “No. God will provide.” When the water was up on the roof, a helicopter flew by and offered to drop a rope for the man to escape to safety, but the man said, “No. God will provide.” Finally, the man drowned, and he found himself at the gate talking to Peter. He explained to Peter what had happened, and he complained that he died while waiting for God to provide. But Peter responded, “God sent you two boats and a helicopter! What more were you waiting for!”

Not only can we see the unseen God at work in the book of Esther, and the people of God at work in the book of Esther, but we can see the gospel in the book of Esther.

Much of what happens in Esther is driven by the irrevocable nature of the Persian edicts. In place of the first irrevocable edict, a second edict is issued to counteract it. Can we not see a gospel parallel there? Because of our sin, an irrevocable decree of death was pronounced in the garden. How can it be undone? Through a second decree, the gospel.

Like the Jews of Persia, all men are under an irrevocable decree of death. Because of Adam’s sin? No! Because of their own sin (Romans 5:12). And like the Jews of Persia, the people of God have a mediator who works on their behalf. And like God’s people in Esther, we can rejoice that there is a second decree that counteracts the first decree. Under the first decree we are dressed

in sackcloth and cannot approach the king, but under the second decree we wear royal robes and we can come boldly before the throne of grace.

The book of Esther prefigures our own redemption through the gospel. The theme of Esther is reversal, and our hope in the gospel depends on the greatest reversal of all time – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. “Because I live, you also will live.” (John 14:9) All history revolves around that event. Like the Jews of old, we too will someday find ourselves alive and well after the day of death has come and gone.

I have greatly enjoyed the privilege of teaching this wonderful, but often neglected, book of Esther. I hope that we will all continue to study it.

LESSON 32

Back to Ezra

Ezra 1 began with the first year of Cyrus in 539 BC. Ezra 6 ended 24 years later with the dedication of the temple in 515 BC.

Why didn't the book of Ezra end with Chapter 6? After all, the temple has been rebuilt. Why do we need another chapter? Jeremiah helps us answer that question.

Jeremiah 7:3-4 - Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'

Prior to the exile, the people had a false confidence. They thought that the temple would protect them. They did not believe that God would ever let anything happen to the temple. But, of course, they were wrong, as Jeremiah had told them. What this tells us is that just rebuilding the temple was not enough. Something else was needed. What was it? Ezekiel answers that question for us.

First, Ezekiel also told the people that their confidence in the temple was misplaced. In fact, Ezekiel saw the glory of God departing from the temple because of the people's idolatry. But just prior to that, Ezekiel told the people what they needed:

Ezekiel 11:19-20 - And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. **I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh**, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

In short, the Jews prior to the exile had a temple but needed a new heart. And that was also true of the Jews in Ezra's day. By the end of Ezra 6, they had a new temple. But they still needed a new heart, and that is why we have Ezra 7-10.

The second return occurred in 458 BC. What that means is that there is a lapse of 57 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It was during that time that the events in Esther occurred. We know almost nothing about what happened to the former exiles in Judah during that period. All of the events in the final four chapters of the book of Ezra will occur during that one year, 458 BC.

The only reference we have to what happened between 515 and 458 is in Ezra 4:6, where the hostility of the Samaritans during the reign of Xerxes (486 to 465) is described. What we can deduce from that description is that the Jews were most likely subjected to similar hostility from their neighbors throughout much of that intervening period.

When we left Ezra 6, Darius was king. Then Xerxes, Darius' son, was king during the events in Esther and in Ezra 4:6, and now Xerxes' son Artaxerxes is king after the assassination of Xerxes by the commander of his bodyguard. Recall that Artaxerxes may have been the son of Queen Vashti from Esther 1. He was not the son of Queen Esther. We can only speculate about what happened to Esther after the events in her book or after the death of Xerxes.

As we turn our attention back to the book of Ezra, we should pause and remember the key themes that we identified in the first half of the book.

Those themes were the temple, the law, and the wall. Looked at another way, those themes were worship (the temple), the word of God (the law), and separation or purity (the wall). We will see each of those themes again in the second half of Ezra, but the final two will play the most prominent role: the law and the wall.

Finally, in Ezra 7 we meet the scholar-priest from whom the book of Ezra has taken its name. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce us to Ezra, to his task, and to his expedition. Chapters 9 and 10 will show us the moral disarray that he found at Jerusalem when he returned and will show us the strict countermeasures that he applied. Much of the account is written by Ezra in the first person.

As we will soon see, being surrounded by people with a different way of life seems to have had a negative effect on the Jews. Likewise today, being surrounded by people with a different outlook on life can have a negative effect on our own purity and godliness. Some of the Jews here appear to have lived like their neighbors in order to be at peace with them and be accepted by them. That is always a danger for God's people, both then and now. Ezra's call for purity and for a return to God's word is call we all need to hear. It is a call for God's people at any time in history.

What had life been like for the returned exiles during the nearly 60 years between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7? In a word, it had been rough.

From both Ezra and Nehemiah it seems that the people were constantly threatened by their enemies. We saw that earlier in Ezra 4:6-23. And we also see that in Nehemiah 4 and Nehemiah 6. Most of those descriptions describe events after Ezra 7, but Ezra 4:6 described an event before Ezra 7. In any event, the impression is that these threats from their neighbors was a constant problem.

Also, there seems to be no doubt that the vast majority of the former exiles were poor. Remember from Ezra 2:66-67, that the rich had horses while the poor had donkeys, and the donkeys outnumber the horses 9 to 1.

Also, when Haggai prophesied about 20 years after the first arrival, the economic situation appears to have worsened considerably. A run of bad harvests and high prices combined with enemy intervention had left the Jews with nothing but their expensive paneled homes to remind them of their former prosperity — and to remind them of their neglect of God's house. (Haggai 1:4)

Later, in Nehemiah, we read:

Nehemiah 5:3 - Some also there were that said, We have mortgaged our lands, vineyards, and houses, that we might buy corn, because of the dearth.

Also, these poor were apparently being mistreated and abused by their fellow Jews.

Malachi 3:5 - And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness ... against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

As we see later in Ezra 9, many of the Jews had forsaken the Law of Moses and had married foreign women. And even the religious leaders were failing their responsibilities.

Malachi 2:7-8 - For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ye are departed out of the way; ye have caused many to stumble at the law; ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi, saith the LORD of hosts.

The people no longer followed or even knew the law of God, and they no longer cared about the things of God. And their leaders were no better.

What was needed was a restoration. And, of course, the only way to achieve a restoration is to return to the original blueprint, the word of God.

What was needed was someone who could encourage God's people (sometimes with forceful encouragement!) to once again worship and live as God wanted them to worship and live.

Enter Ezra!

Ezra 7:1-5

Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, Ezra the son of Seraiah, the son of Azariah, the son of Hilkiah, 2 The son of Shallum, the son of Zadok, the son of Ahitub, 3 The son of Amariah, the son of Azariah, the son of Meraioth, 4 The son of Zerariah, the son of Uzzi, the son of Bukki, 5 The son of Abishua, the son of Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the chief priest:

“After these things?” Which things? We looked at that question at length in our introduction, and we won't repeat it all here. But recall that Ezra 4:7-23 jumped ahead in time until later in the reign of Artaxerxes, and so “these

things” here in verse 1 must refer only to the events leading up to the dedication of the temple in 515 BC. As for why the book jumped ahead in time in Chapter 4, we spent a lot of time looking at that back in Chapter 4.

The Artaxerxes mentioned in verse 1 was Artaxerxes I, the third son of Xerxes and Amestris (who may have been Vashti, as we discussed). Artaxerxes reigned from 464 to 424 BC, and Nehemiah was his cupbearer.

We also meet Ezra in verse 1. The name Ezra means “help” and may be a shortened form of the name Azariah, meaning “the Lord has helped.” At least three of his ancestors were named Azariah (1 Chronicles 6:3-15).

Chapter 7 opens with a genealogy that shows Ezra’s connection to Aaron. The genealogy begins with Ezra in verse 1 and walks back through history to Aaron, the first high priest, in verse 5.

This genealogy is presented in an abbreviated form, which we can see when we compare it with the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 6. The two lists agree up to Meraioth, but from there on some of the names are left out of the list here in Chapter 7, and at the end Ezra’s name is added.

Should it bother us that some of the names are left out? Not at all.

It is common to shorten genealogies in the Bible, something perhaps for which we should be thankful!

The phrase “the son of” does not necessarily imply a direct father-son relation, but sometimes passes over generations and simply means “a descendant of.” We know that likely happens at least one place in this genealogy because Ezra is identified as the son of Seraiah in verse 1. Seraiah was High Priest at the time of Zedekiah and was killed by Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 25:18-21). That happened nearly 130 years before these events, so we know that several generations must have been omitted from the list if the Seraiah in verse 1 is the Seraiah in 2 Kings 25. But some commentaries suggest that Ezra was the actual son of a different Seraiah, which is certainly possible.

Other commentators argue that six names were dropped from this genealogy through a copyist's error. They point specifically to the similarity between **Amariah** and **Azariah**, where the break in names occurs. Comparing 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 with Ezra 7:1-5, they suggest that a copyist inadvertently skipped from Amariah to Azariah while copying the list. The original copy had the complete list, but somewhere a copyist dropped some of the names. That theory would explain why we are now missing the middle part of the list, but it is also possible that the text intentionally shortened the list.

Several noteworthy names occur in this genealogy.

- **Aaron**, of course, in verse 5 was the first high priest and principal advisor to his brother, Moses.
- **Eleazar** in verse 5 assisted at the commissioning of Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23).
- **Phinehas** in verse 5 is famous as the priest who speared both the Israelite and the Moabite woman in Numbers 25.
- **Hilkiah** in verse 1 was the High Priest in the time of Joash (2 Kings 22).
- **Zadok** in verse 2 was the High Priest who replaced Abiathar, the last descendant of Eli to occupy that position (1 Kings 2).

All very interesting, but any time we see a genealogy in the Bible we should immediately ask **why** that genealogy was included. What was the point? And there is **always** a point! The Bible is not a phone book. Any time we see a long list of names, we need to look for the theological significance of the list.

One point can be seen just from the length of the genealogy, which prepares us to meet someone of considerable importance. This 16-ancestor genealogy introduces Ezra with a great deal of fanfare and establishes him as the most prominent person in the book. It also "signals that something momentous is to come and that Ezra is at the center of it." (And yes, Ezra himself was likely the author, but sometimes it is okay to blow your own horn!) So, one point of the genealogy is to let us know that we are about to meet someone important.

But the main point of the genealogy does not come just from the length of the genealogy but rather from who is listed. The main point of the genealogy is to show us that Ezra is a direct descendant of Aaron. What that means is that Ezra has the right to act as a priest and has the authority to introduce religious reforms.

The purpose of this genealogy is to establish that Ezra came from a line of High Priests going all the way back to Aaron, although Ezra himself was not a High Priest but rather seems to have been a cousin of the contemporary high priestly family.

Ezra was acting with authority both from the Persian king and also from his Jewish ancestry as part of the High Priestly family. It was important that the people respect Ezra and respect his position among them, and that is why we have this genealogy.

Ezra 7:6

6 This Ezra went up from Babylon; and he was a ready scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given: and the king granted him all his request, according to the hand of the LORD his God upon him.

In Jewish tradition, Ezra is regarded as a second Moses.

Why? Because it was perhaps Ezra more than any other person who stamped Israel with its lasting character as a people of the book. Some commentators go too far with this point and suggest that Ezra actually wrote or perhaps rewrote much of the law that we find in the books of Moses. But as we read Ezra's book, we see that the law was something Ezra received rather than something Ezra created.

Verse 6 is **definitive** on this point – it describes the law as the Law of **Moses**, not as the Law of Ezra! And verse 6 provides the **source** for the Law of Moses – “the law of Moses, **which the LORD God of Israel had given.**” The law did not come from Ezra. The law did not come from Moses. The law came from God.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra came from Babylon. Nehemiah, by contrast, came from Susa, which is where we found Queen Esther. Coming from Babylon meant that Ezra had lived with the great majority of exiled Jews, who seem to have been concentrated in Babylon and the surrounding areas.

The phrase “went up” or “came up” in verse 6 is an idiom commonly used throughout the Old Testament to denote a trip to Jerusalem from anywhere. Because Jerusalem is located at the top of a mountain, travelers must literally ascend up to the city no matter where they originally came from.

We are told in verse 6 that Ezra was a scribe. But not only was Ezra a scribe, he was a scribe “versed” or “skilled” in the law of Moses. The Hebrew word refers to a person of the highest efficiency or a professional of the highest order. The word literally means “rapid.” Its use here suggests a quickness of grasp and an ease of movement through complex and complicated material.

We are also told in verse 6 that the favor of the Lord or the hand of the Lord was upon Ezra, which means that God had given Ezra his special favor. This description also suggests that God had influenced Artaxerxes to act in sending Ezra back to Judah and granting all of Ezra’s requests. We are not told what Ezra requested, but likely he requested some or all of the things granted to him in the letter of Artaxerxes that we are about to read.

We are familiar with the office of scribe from its frequent mention in the New Testament, and often not in positive terms. But that office seems to have largely originated with Ezra. These scribes studied, interpreted, and copied the scriptures, and they came to be greatly revered by the Jews. And, as we see in the gospel accounts, scribes wielded significant power throughout Israel by the time of the New Testament.

Scribes had three primary duties.

First, as the title “scribe” suggests, they served as the copyists of the law.

Second, they served as the teachers of the law. It was their duty to make sure that every Israelite was acquainted with the rules and regulations of the law.

Third, they served in a judicial capacity, passing sentence in the court of justice. Their knowledge of and skill in interpreting the law made them ideal candidates for the position of judge. Scribes were routinely found among the ranks of the Sanhedrin.

The prophets condemned those who handled the scriptures but who did not know God.

Jeremiah 2:8 - The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and **they that handle the law knew me not**: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal, and walked after things that do not profit.

Sadly that situation eventually came to be true of the scribes that came along after Ezra.

Prior to the exile, the priests were regarded as the guardians of the law, but after the exile that role moved to the scribes. According to Jewish tradition, Ezra marked the point of this transition.

By the time of Christ, the scribes had drifted far away from the model that Ezra had left for them. In fact, they had drifted so far that when their long awaited Messiah arrived, they did not recognize him. Here is what the scribes were like in Jesus' day:

Luke 20:46-47 - Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.

That is **not** how the scribes started. The scribes of Jesus' day had fallen far away from the standard that Ezra had set for them. Did that happen overnight? No. It was a gradual process, and there is nothing in the world more dangerous than a gradual drift away from God - one so gradual that it is unnoticed.

LESSON 33

Ezra 7:7-9

7 And there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, unto Jerusalem, in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king. 8 And he came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. 9 For upon the first day of the first month began he to go up from Babylon, and on the first day of the fifth month came he to Jerusalem, according to the good hand of his God upon him.

Ezra did not return to Jerusalem by himself, but instead he was accompanied by a group of Jews, including some from the various groups that we studied earlier - priests, Levites, singers, gatekeepers, and temple servants. The actual names of many of the returnees will be given in Ezra 8.

Verses 7-8 tells us that the return occurred during the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, which was 458 BC, and verse 9 tells us that the journey lasted about four months. But we will learn in Ezra 8:31 that those four months include about two weeks of preparation time, which means that the actual journey took about three and a half months.

A direct path from Babylon to Jerusalem was about 500 miles, but travelers almost always took a longer route through Northern Syria to avoid the Arabian desert (which is made even more certain by their arrival in mid-summer).

The trip by the longer route could have been 800 to 900 miles. Ezra's group would have followed the Euphrates River north from Babylon, then journeyed west across the plains to Damascus, and finally south through Samaria to Jerusalem. Covering that distances in three and a half months meant that they averaged about 10 miles per day, which is about half the usual rate of travel. The slower rate of travel was likely due to the children and elderly in their number as well as due to the large amount of gold and silver they were carrying with them.

The journey would have been dangerous, particularly at this time due to the revolt that was occurring in Egypt and the general lawlessness that accompanied that revolt. (We will have more to say about this revolt later.) But the people arrived safely in Jerusalem because, as verse 9 tells us, the good hand of God was on Ezra.

Ezra 7:10

10 For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.

One commentary I read described verse 10 as “one of the most amazing verses in the entire Bible,” and I certainly agree. It is a wonderful verse! If you highlight verses in your Bible, then either highlight this verse or throw your highlighter away!

Verse 10 is a key verse in Ezra, and is in fact a key verse in the entire Bible.

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.”

All of Ezra’s actions in the remainder of this book that bears his name must be interpreted in light of this key verse. Verse 10 shows us the secret of Ezra’s lasting influence.

And verse 10 reinforces all of the central themes of this book - the law (the word of God), the temple (the worship of God), and the wall (the purity that God demands).

What did Ezra do? Verse 10 tells us that he did four things.

First, Ezra “prepared his heart” or “set his heart.” Ezra determined within his heart that he would faithfully and resolutely commit himself to the habits detailed in the rest of the verse. The word “heart” in verse 10 means the whole of one’s being. Religion was not just a hobby for Ezra, but was his whole life.

Second, Ezra studied the law of the Lord. He devoted his life to the reading and analysis of God’s Word. He delighted in it.

Third, Ezra practiced the law of the Lord. His examination of the Scriptures was not done simply to grow in knowledge. Ezra applied that knowledge to his life. Yes, application is required, but so is knowledge. We can't apply what we don't know.

And fourth, Ezra taught the law throughout Israel. He did not keep the things he learned to himself. Ezra taught them to others.

In short, he studied it, he lived it, and he taught it!

“[Ezra] is a model reformer in that what he taught he had first lived, and what he lived he had first made sure of in the Scriptures. With study, conduct and teaching put deliberately in this right order, each of these was able to function properly at its best: study was saved from unreality, conduct from uncertainty, and teaching from insincerity and shallowness.”

In this one verse we have our own tasks when it comes to God's word – we must prepare our heart, we must study it, we must do it, and we must teach it. All four things are required, and each one depends on the other three. We can't live what we don't know. We can't teach what we haven't studied.

Many today fail to study the word at all, and sadly that is not just true of those out in the world but is increasingly true in the Lord's church. We were once known far and wide as a people of the Book, but I fear we are losing that reputation.

What does it mean to be a people of the Book?

- It means that we love the word of God.
- It means that we live the word of God.
- It means that we study the word of God.
- It means that we know the word of God.
- It means that we carry the word of God around with us.
- It means that we rely on the word of God.
- It means that we search the word of God.

- It means that we turn to the word of God for answers.
- It means that we teach the word of God.
- It means that we proclaim the word of God.
- It means that we delight in the word of God.
- It means that we memorize the word of God.
- It means that we instruct our children in the word of God.
- It means that we respond to temptations by quoting the word of God.
- It means that we understand the power and relevance of the word of God in our modern world.
- It means that we quote the Bible in our daily speech.
- It means that the word of our God is our standard in everything that we do.
- It means that we put the word of God ahead of our own popularity.
- It means that we compare all that we hear with the word of God.
- It means that if the price of peace is compromising the word of God, then that price is too high.
- It means that our sermons and classes begin with the phrase “Please open your Bibles to...”

That is what it means to be a people of the Book! The denominations have largely cast the Bible away – but that must never be true of the Lord’s church.

Isaiah 5:24 - Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: **because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts**, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Hosea 4:6 - **My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge**; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

What you don’t know can destroy you!

Many who study, fail to do what the word commands them to do.

1 John 5:3 - For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.

John 14:15 - If you love me, you will keep my commandments.

Obedience is what happens when study and love come together.

Ezra loved God's word, and Ezra loved God's people. And because Ezra loved both, Ezra told God's people what they needed to hear. Ezra taught the truth in love.

R. L. Whiteside - Much is said about preaching the truth in love and so it should be preached. But in love of what? The preacher should so love the truth that he will not sacrifice any of it nor pervert it, and he should so love people that he will not withhold from them even one unpleasant truth. He that does either of these things loves neither the truth nor the people.

What must our own attitude be toward God's word? Ezra 7:10 tells us.

We must set our heart to study it, and to do it, and to teach it. God's word cannot be just an afterthought or a weekend hobby to us. Our entire life – both individually and as a congregation – must be centered on the word of God. When we move away from God's word, we move away from God. When we neglect God's word, we neglect God. When we fail to love God's word, we fail to love God.

If we are no longer seen as a people of the book, then what is the answer to that problem? Verse 10 gives us the answer – "Ezra had set his heart."

The answer is **focus!** Ezra had devoted himself to God's word – to studying it, to obeying it, to teaching it. In short, Ezra was focused on God's word! Absent focus we will accomplish nothing, and that is not just true in our service to God. Excellence and achievement in any area demand focus.

We live in the great age of distraction, and it shows. If we are mediocre and lackluster in our service, then it is likely because we are distracted by other concerns.

Matthew 13:22 - As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.

Matthew 6:21 - For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

If we want to know what is important to us, we need to look at what we are focused on – if we want to know where our treasure is, we need to look for our heart.

And where would we be without the Bible? We would know from the creation that God exists and that God is powerful (unless we were fools), but we would not know anything more. We should thank God every day that he has given us his word.

Ezra was focused on God. Ezra was focused on his mission. Ezra was focused on God's word. And just look at what he accomplished for God and for God's people!

Ezra 7:11-14

11 Now this is the copy of the letter that the king Artaxerxes gave unto Ezra the priest, the scribe, even a scribe of the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of his statutes to Israel. 12 Artaxerxes, king of kings, unto Ezra the priest, a scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect peace, and at such a time. 13 I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of his priests and Levites, in my realm, which are minded of their own freewill to go up to Jerusalem, go with thee. 14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which is in thine hand;

Verses 11-26 contain a letter from King Artaxerxes.

As with the other letters by Persian kings that we have seen in this book, some question the authenticity of this letter. As before, they say that the letter is too Jewish to have come from the pen of a Persian king. They also complain that the letter gives powers to Ezra that are much more extensive that one would expect.

But, as before, the answer is simple – the king undoubtedly had help in writing this letter. In fact, Ezra himself was likely responsible for writing much, if not all, of this letter, and then afterward the letter was approved by the king.

As for the powers granted to Ezra, Nehemiah was also granted extraordinary powers just 14 years later by this same king. We will see in a moment that the political situation surrounding these events likely played a big role in the powers that the king gave to Ezra.

The authenticity of the letter is further shown in its use of Persian terms such as “king of kings” in verse 12 and “seven counselors” in verse 14 (the latter being something that we also saw in Esther).

The letter shows familiarity with Persian customs, and one commentary noted that the letter has a similar form to other Persian letters of the time that have been uncovered.

While the introduction to the letter in verse 11 is written in Hebrew, the letter itself in verses 12-26 is written in Aramaic, the language of official correspondence in the Persian Empire.

This letter does not just send Ezra off on a mission. Instead, the letter sends Ezra off on a mission with the funds and resources that he needed to accomplish that task.

As we read through the entirety of the letter, we will see that it contains five stipulations:

- (1) It authorizes Ezra and those with him to go to Jerusalem to see that God’s law is observed.
- (2) It provides a grant to buy sacrifices and temple vessels.
- (3) It commands the treasurers in the provinces to give supplies to Ezra.
- (4) It frees all the temple officials from taxation.
- (5) It authorizes Ezra to set up a judicial system.

As with Joseph many years before and as with Esther just a few years before, Ezra had authority in a foreign government, and, as with Joseph and Esther, that authority was part of God's providence in using Ezra to fulfill God's purposes for his people. (And again, as for those who say Christians should stay out of politics, I'm glad Joseph, Esther, and Ezra didn't do that!)

Why did the king send Ezra on this mission?

We have already mentioned one reason – God wanted the king to send Ezra on the mission. But there may have also been a reason in the king's mind that had to do with what was going on elsewhere in his kingdom (and this also was most likely part of God's plan to make sure the setting was right for what God planned to accomplish through this king).

In 460 BC, the Greeks sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia. This fleet sailed to Egypt, gained a great victory over the Persian army and captured Memphis in the autumn of 459. This Greek victory placed the coast of Palestine and Phoenicia into Greek hands.

It was in 458, immediately after the fall of Memphis to the Greeks, that Ezra was sent to Judea "to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem" (7:14) and to reorganize and strengthen Israel, which was the traditional enemy of the Philistines (now in Greek hands).

From the point of view of the Persian king, a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal fortress. As long as the Greeks dominated the coast and dominated Egypt, the Persian king would support a strong Judean province headed by a Judean-Persian official and peopled by a pro-Persian population, many of whose families remained back in Babylon and Persia (as hostages if needed). This political situation likely explains the extraordinary powers that the king gave to Ezra here.

The letter from Artaxerxes begins with a typical salutation in verse 12. The phrase "king of kings" was a popular title for a Persian monarch.

Ezra is the recipient of the letter, and, as we discussed, very likely also the author of the letter, given to the king only for his signature or seal – after the king got advice from his seven counselors. (We saw this same group in Esther 1:13, where they were advising Xerxes, the father of this king.)

Verse 13 is the permission of the king allowing the Israelites to return to Jerusalem under the authority of Ezra. This return was not forced. This decree allowed all Jews to return to Jerusalem if they wanted to do so. As we often see in this book, verse 13 separates the people from the religious leaders, which is yet another indication that Ezra had a hand in writing this letter.

In verse 14, Ezra is told by the king to go to Judah to see if the Jews there are living according to the Law of God. Ezra was being sent to Jerusalem with the express purpose of establishing the law of God in the land.

No reason is given for this order, and most likely it originated from Ezra himself because that is what Ezra wanted to do and that is what Ezra knew God wanted him to do. Some suggest that Ezra may have received reports from Judah that distressed him and caused him to want to travel there and initiate his reforms.

And, as we said, Artaxerxes naturally saw Judah as an area that could be easily influenced by Egypt and the Greeks, and so he likely had concerns of his own that something nefarious was happening there.

The phrase “the law of your God which is in your hand” in verse 14 confirms that this was a written law, not just an oral law.

That phrase certainly means that Ezra knew and understood the law, but it may have meant that Ezra had a literal scroll in his hand. If so, then Ezra, it seems, was one who carried God’s word around with him wherever he went. Yet another lesson for us. We should never go out to battle without our sword!

Ezra 7:15-18

15 And to carry the silver and gold, which the king and his counsellors have freely offered unto the God of Israel, whose habitation is in Jerusalem, 16

And all the silver and gold that thou canst find in all the province of Babylon, with the freewill offering of the people, and of the priests, offering willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem: 17 That thou mayest buy speedily with this money bullocks, rams, lambs, with their meat offerings and their drink offerings, and offer them upon the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. 18 And whatsoever shall seem good to thee, and to thy brethren, to do with the rest of the silver and the gold, that do after the will of your God.

The second topic addressed in the letter from the king is the provision for the temple of God.

The Persian authorities offered silver and gold to Ezra dedicated for the purchase of animals and other offerings. This money was to be taken from the province of Babylon, which was the province from which the Jews began their journey. The monetary tribute was to be supplemented by the freewill offerings of the people and priests who voluntarily returned to the land of Israel.

The animals specifically identified in verse 17 are bulls, rams, and lambs. Any extra silver and gold was to be used at the discretion of Ezra and his fellow priests (referred to as “thy brethren” in verse 18).

How did this pagan king know so much about Jewish worship? That question has a one word answer - Ezra. Ezra almost certainly wrote all of this for the king’s signature - including who got the excess money!

We should keep in mind that the exiled Jews were not able to keep these sacrifices while they were separated from the temple. What that means is that there must have been a very large sacrifice whenever the various groups returned.

Of course, that is big difference between the old covenant and the new covenant. Under the old covenant, sacrifices were offered at a certain point in time and at a particular place.

Under the new covenant, Jesus is our perfect sacrifice, and his sacrifice was accomplished once for all.

Hebrews 9:26 - But as it is, he has appeared **once for all** at the end of the ages to put away sin by **the sacrifice of himself**.

And note from that verse and other verses that Jesus sacrificed himself. We very often sing a song (“Lamb of God”) in which we are asked to sing that the Romans sacrificed Christ. That, of course, is absolutely wrong and contrary to Scripture. The Romans **crucified** Christ; they did **not sacrifice** Christ.

And we, like the old testament worshippers, are to present sacrifices, but our sacrifice is a “living sacrifice.” (Romans 12:1) That is something we can do everywhere and all the time (at least, all the time that we are “living”!).

LESSON 34

Ezra 7:19-24

19 The vessels also that are given thee for the service of the house of thy God, those deliver thou before the God of Jerusalem. 20 And whatsoever more shall be needful for the house of thy God, which thou shalt have occasion to bestow, bestow it out of the king's treasure house. 21 And I, even I Artaxerxes the king, do make a decree to all the treasurers which are beyond the river, that whatsoever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, shall require of you, it be done speedily, 22 Unto an hundred talents of silver, and to an hundred measures of wheat, and to an hundred baths of wine, and to an hundred baths of oil, and salt without prescribing how much. 23 Whatsoever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be diligently done for the house of the God of heaven: for why should there be wrath against the realm of the king and his sons? 24 Also we certify you, that touching any of the priests and Levites, singers, porters, Nethinims, or ministers of this house of God, it shall not be lawful to impose toll, tribute, or custom, upon them.

The vessels in verse 19 may have been some that were overlooked when the captured vessels were returned by Cyrus in Ezra 1. But it is also possible that these vessels were new. Verse 20 says that Ezra had a right to draw on the royal treasury if anything else was required.

In verses 21-24, the king addresses the Persian treasurers that Ezra would encounter on his trip to Judah. This letter would serve both as Ezra's introduction to those officials and as a command to them from the king to give Ezra whatever he required.

Verses 21-24 may be the commissions that we will read about in the next chapter.

Ezra 8:36 - And they delivered the king's **commissions** unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

Ezra's rights of requisition from these officials were considerable but not unlimited. The letter provides in verse 22 a ceiling on each item except for the salt, which was a very cheap commodity at this time.

The amount of silver in verse 22 is enormous (but remember that that figure is a maximum value; we don't know how much Ezra actually received, only that it was not greater than 100 talents). A Babylonian talent weighed about 75 pounds, and so 100 talents of silver would have weighed almost four tons. Herodotus tells us that the annual income from the entire satrapy was 350 talents. So the maximum amount of silver that Ezra could have required was almost one-third of the annual income of the entire province.

Some commentators are bothered by that large amount, and so they argue that a copyist error may have replaced "mina" for "talent" for the silver in verse 22. (The Babylonian "talent" was 60 minas, with a mina being 60 shekels.) But there is no evidence of that. Perhaps Ezra just wanted to generate some good will in the provinces by letting them know he could ask for a very large amount of silver, but then asking for a much smaller amount.

In verse 23, we see a concern by the king that the wrath of God not fall on him, or on his realm, or on his sons. We have seen that concern before in this book expressed by a king, and it was common in the polytheistic world in which they lived. (Recall from Ezra 6:10 that Darius likewise asked for prayers for his well being and for that of his sons.) The king here was motivated by his own personal interest to see that these activities were done in the proper manner to avoid offending the God of Israel. Perhaps the king added this part himself to a decree that was written for him by Ezra.

In verse 24, the exemption of the temple officials from taxation is known from other ancient sources to have been a Persian policy. But, of course, Ezra (the priest) had a personal interest in making sure this common provision made its way into this particular edict!

Ezra 7:25-26

25 And thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God, that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river, all such as know the laws of thy God; and teach ye them that know them not. 26 And whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment.

In verse 25, the king's attention returns to Ezra. The king instructs Ezra to teach the law to those who don't know it and to appoint magistrates and judges to enforce the law.

We know that Ezra did not need a command to teach the law because verse 10 told us that Ezra had already set his heart to teach the law.

And we know from extra-Biblical sources that Persian kings were concerned that each of their subject peoples would take seriously their own laws, presumably so that they would also take seriously the laws of Persia.

In verse 26, the king refers to both the law of God and the law of the king, and he prescribes severe punishments for those who disobey either law.

These commands by King Artaxerxes are very similar to earlier commands by Darius with regard to the Egyptians. In 519 BC, Darius ordered the Egyptian satrap to assemble "the wise men ... from among the warriors, the priests, and the scribes of Egypt so that they may set down in writing the ancient laws of Egypt." That same text refers to "the law of Pharaoh, of the temples, and of the people."

Once again, extra-Biblical evidence confirms the historical accuracy of Ezra. The Persians had respect for the ancient laws of their peoples, including religious law, and the Persians were willing to put those laws into effect as far as possible even within the boundaries of their own empire.

The authority granted to Ezra in these verses essentially makes him a sort of religious governor in the province.

The phrase “all the people who are beyond the river” most likely refers to the Jews who live in the province, as opposed to including people from other nations. In other words, the king is most likely **not** forcing everyone in the province to live according to Jewish religious law. But the king is forcing the Jews to live according to their own laws.

Some commentaries argue that the king is commanding **all** who live in the area, Jew and non-Jew alike, to obey the Jewish law – but that is not what we see Ezra doing in the closing chapters of the book.

Ezra and his judges are given permission to punish lawbreakers in four ways.

First, they can execute those who refuse to follow the law. Second, they can banish evildoers from the province. Third, they can confiscate the offender’s possessions. And fourth, they can imprison those who were found guilty. We will see Ezra inflicting some of these punishments later in the book (and keep in mind that Ezra most likely wrote this part of the decree).

The second Aramaic part of Ezra ends in verse 26, and the remainder of the book of Ezra is written in Hebrew.

Ezra 7:27-28

27 Blessed be the LORD God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king’s heart, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem: 28 And hath extended mercy unto me before the king, and his counsellors, and before all the king’s mighty princes. And I was strengthened as the hand of the LORD my God was upon me, and I gathered together out of Israel chief men to go up with me.

With verses 27-28, we are suddenly made very much aware of Ezra the man as his own voice breaks into the text with, as one commentator said, “a grateful delight which time has done nothing to diminish.”

Ezra will take up this history himself in the first person until the end of Chapter 9. Nehemiah, like Ezra, does much of his own narration. While the use of first person is common with the prophets, it is not common in the historical books. In fact, the book of Nehemiah is the only historical book written primarily in

the first person. (Ezra, of course, could not have written Ezra 1-6 in the first person because that all happened long before he arrived.)

Verse 27 tells us that God moved the king to beautify or adorn the temple.

The Hebrew word for “adorn” is also found in Isaiah and in the Psalms. In Isaiah 60:7, 13, the object of the verb is the temple, in Isaiah 55:5 and 60:9, the object is the people of God, and in Psalm 149:4 the object is the meek.

The use of the word in Isaiah to refer to the temple is of particular interest here and has caused some to conclude that this return marked the event prophesied by Isaiah 60. But, having the New Testament, we know that those final chapters of Isaiah pointed instead to a later day than Ezra’s day in which the temple would be perfectly adorned by the suffering servant, Jesus. This event in Ezra’s day may have been a partial fulfillment, but the complete fulfillment did not happen until the Messiah arrived.

Here, at the end of Chapter 7, we have an unfortunate chapter break. This final phrase is probably better seen as introducing Chapter 8 rather than closing Chapter 7.

Ezra closes the chapter by revealing that he gathered some of the leading men of Israel to return with him to Jerusalem, which would likely have caused many others to join with them in returning to Jerusalem.

And, again, although we often say that the people “returned” to Jerusalem, they were returning only in the sense that Jews had left and now Jews were coming back. But initially **most** (and by now, **all**) of the Jews who returned were different Jews from those who had left. The Jews who had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar had died by now, and it was their descendants who were returning. But these descendants had never lived in Jerusalem, but rather they had all been born in exile. What must it have been like when they finally saw Jerusalem with their own eyes!

Ezra 8:1

1 These are now the chief of their fathers, and this is the genealogy of them that went up with me from Babylon, in the reign of Artaxerxes the king.

Chapter 8 begins with a list of the names and the genealogies of those who returned with Ezra in 458 BC.

The heads of each family are identified along with the number of males who accompanied each of them.

As we just mentioned, the end of Ezra 7:28 should really begin Chapter 8. In the second half of 7:28, Ezra mentioned that he gathered some of the leading men of Israel to journey to Jerusalem with him. In this list, those men are specifically identified.

When we examine the list, what we find is that almost all of the Jews who returned with Ezra were direct descendants of those who had returned almost eighty years earlier under Sheshbazzar.

Once again we are confronted with the question of the faithfulness of those who had stayed behind in Babylon when the Jews were first allowed to return to Jerusalem. Had they been wrong to stay behind? Those who were returning now had been born outside of Jerusalem. Should they have been born in Jerusalem instead?

On one hand, Isaiah had called on the people to return long before they had the opportunity to return.

Isaiah 48:20 – Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, “The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!”

And we know that it was part of God’s plan of redemption that the Jews return to Jerusalem. Isaiah had prophesied that the gospel would be proclaimed first in Jerusalem. Daniel had prophesied about the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem under the Romans at a time when that temple had not yet been rebuilt. God wanted his people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

And it was vital that there be faithful Jews in Jerusalem to welcome the Messiah.

But, on the other hand, such noted Jews as Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Mordecai, and Esther remained in exile, at least for a time. In fact, Ezra is described in glowing terms as an expert in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Ezra must have recognized that the Lord wanted the Jews to return to Israel. Why didn't Ezra return earlier?

It is possible that both Ezra and Nehemiah were prevented from returning because they held official positions in the king's court, Ezra as a scribe and Nehemiah as a cupbearer. It seems that both needed the express permission of the Persian king before they could return.

It is possible that the majority of those who stayed behind did so because of financial reasons. We know that some who remained behind financially assisted those who chose to return. Perhaps they also saved their own money so that later they could return with Ezra without being a burden on others. Or maybe they preferred the riches of Babylon over the poverty of Jerusalem.

Of course, even now under Ezra, many Jews still decided to remain behind in exile. Many exiles had likely chosen to marry women of Babylon and so chose to remain near their wives' families. Perhaps some had positions of authority and wealth that they were unwilling to give up or perhaps let them do more for God's people by staying behind. For some, the decision may have involved a lack of faith. Perhaps, unlike Moses in Hebrews 11:25, they chose **not** to be mistreated with the people of God but rather chose to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin by staying behind in Babylon. But some may have stayed behind because of advanced age (Daniel?) or bad health.

In short, we cannot say that all of those who remained behind were wrong to do so, and we cannot say that all of those who remained behind were right to do so. We need to leave that determination to God.

Ezra 8:2-14

2 Of the sons of Phinehas; Gershom: of the sons of Ithamar; Daniel: of the sons of David; Hattush. 3 Of the sons of **Shechaniah**, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty. 4 Of the sons of **Pahathmoab**; Elihoenai the son of Zerariah, and with him two hundred males. 5 Of the sons of **Shechaniah**; the son of Jahaziel, and with him three hundred males. 6 Of the sons also of **Adin**; Ebed the son of Jonathan, and with him fifty males. 7 And of the sons of **Elam**; Jeshaiiah the son of Athaliah, and with him seventy males. 8 And of the sons of **Shephatiah**; Zebadiah the son of Michael, and with him fourscore males. 9 Of the sons of **Joab**; Obadiah the son of Jehiel, and with him two hundred and eighteen males. 10 And of the sons of **Shelomith**; the son of Josiphiah, and with him an hundred and threescore males. 11 And of the sons of **Bebai**; Zechariah the son of Bebai, and with him twenty and eight males. 12 And of the sons of **Azgad**; Johanan the son of Hakkatan, and with him an hundred and ten males. 13 And of the last sons of **Adonikam**, whose names are these, Eliphelet, Jeiel, and Shemaiah, and with them threescore males. 14 Of the sons also of **Bigvai**; Uthai, and Zabbud, and with them seventy males.

The Daniel in verse 2 is not the famous Daniel, who lived years earlier, but perhaps he was named in honor of the famous Daniel.

As with almost every list of names in the Bible, some commentators doubt the authenticity of this list. The reason for their doubt is that this list contains only 12 families, and they argue that means this list was contrived to represent the 12 tribes of Israel.

There are at least four problems with that argument.

First, by their logic, had there actually been only 12 families, then Ezra would have had to alter the list, thereby making it unauthentic, to convince the critics that the list was authentic!

Second, nowhere does the text say that the 12 families represent the twelve tribes.

Third, if that symbol had been intended, then Ezra could have chosen only 12 families to accompany him for that reason. That is, it is possible for the list to be authentic and to be a symbol at the same time.

Fourth, there are really more than 12 families mentioned here because verse 2 includes an additional three families (Phinehas, Ithamar, and David), although they are not enumerated like the 12 families in verses 3-14. Perhaps these 12 were listed this way to remind us of the 12 tribes.

We saw a similar list back in Ezra 2 with regard to the first return under Cyrus, but there are a few differences between the list in Ezra 2 and the list in Ezra 8.

Here in Ezra 8 the priestly families (Phinehas and Ithamar in verse 2) are mentioned first, while in Ezra 2 the priestly families were mentioned last. Phinehas in verse 2 was the son of Aaron's third son, Eleazar, and Ithamar was Aaron's fourth son (Exodus 6:23-25).

Another difference between this list in Ezra 8 and the list in Ezra 2 is that this list includes a different descendant of King David in verse 2: "Of the sons of David, Hattush." Ezra 2:2 mentions Zerubbabel, the descendant of King David that we met earlier in our study of Zechariah.

As we know, it was crucial that the line of David be preserved so that Jesus could later be born from the line of David to rule forever on the throne of David. But note that Hattush was not the leader that Zerubbabel had been. Now the leaders are the priests and the scribes.

Also, note that the ESV translation of verses 2-3 is odd: "of the sons of David; Hattush. Of the sons of Shechaniah, of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah: and with him were reckoned by genealogy of the males an hundred and fifty." Why are both Shechaniah and Pharosh mentioned as the fathers of Zechariah? I think a better view is that the text should be read as: "of the sons of David; Hattush, of the sons of Shechaniah. Of the sons of Pharosh; Zechariah..." That is, I think Shechaniah is mentioned here to show us how Hattush is related to David, which is explained further in 1 Chronicles 3.

1 Chronicles 3:9, 22 - These were all the sons of David, beside the sons of the concubines, and Tamar their sister. ... And the sons of Shechaniah; Shemaiah: and the sons of Shemaiah; Hattush, and Igeal, and Bariah, and Neariah, and Shaphat, six.

From 1 Chronicles 3, we can deduce that Hattush was likely in the fourth generation after Zerubbabel. Dating Zerubbabel's birth around 560 BC, and taking a generation to be about 25 years, we get a date of around 460 BC, which is very close to 458 BC, the date of this return.

If we compare the family names in verses 4-14 with the names in Ezra 2:3-15, we find that almost all of the families are present on both lists. The exceptions are Shecaniah and Shelomith. Here are the names the two lists have in common:

- Parosh (2:3 and 8:3)
- Pahath-moab (2:6 and 8:4)
- Adin (2:15 and 8:6)
- Elam (2:7 and 8:7)
- Shepatiah (2:4 and 8:8)
- Bani (2:10 and 8:10)
- Bebai (2:11 and 8:11)
- Azgad (2:12 and 8:12)
- Adonikam (2:13 and 8:13)
- Bigvai (2:14 and 8:14)

What that means is that most of the people returning in Ezra 8 were being reunited with family members and descendants of family members who had returned 80 years earlier.

Commentaries disagree about the meaning of the phrase "those who came later" or "those who are last" or "the last sons" in verse 13. Most likely it simply means that these three family heads were the last family heads from those families to migrate to Judah and that all of the others had migrated earlier.

As for why this list is given, we answered that question when we studied the list in Ezra 2. The Bible contains lists of honor and lists of shame. Here we see a list of honor. In Chapter 10 we will see a list of shame.

Another reason we have the list is to show the continuity between the Jews who had been exiled, the Jews who had returned under Cyrus, and the Jews who were returning now. This was not a new people. This was the same people.

Finally, another reason we have these names is to show that they were real people. They suffered hardships. They experienced fear. They likely agonized over whether they should leave their home and go to Jerusalem or remain behind. They were real people!

Ezra 8:15

15 And I gathered them together to the river that runneth to Ahava; and there abode we in tents three days: and I viewed the people, and the priests, and found there none of the sons of Levi.

Ezra 7:6-8 briefly mentioned Ezra's departure from Babylon, but here we are given more details.

The returning Jews assembled at the Ahava River, which was most likely a canal of the Euphrates. They camped there for three days, which is a common period of time when beginning or ending a journey. (See Ezra 8:32 and Nehemiah 2:11.)

One thing that happens during these three days is that Ezra reviews the people, and what he discovers is that there are no Levites among them. As we discussed earlier in Chapter 2, the Levites do not seem to have been very numerous at this time. Sheshbazzar also had difficulty in finding Levites who were willing to return to Jerusalem back in Ezra 2:40-42.

We earlier discussed some reasons for the paucity of Levites. 2 Kings 24:14 tells us that the Babylonians had left the poorest of the land behind, and many

of the Levites may have been in that group. Also, the Levites in exile had likely changed professions and saw little to gain from returning to Judah as Levites.

Recall that the very small number of Levites in relation to priests is strong evidence that the law did not originate with Ezra as some today argue.

In the law (Numbers 18:21, 26), it is assumed that the Levites would greatly outnumber the priests because, for example, the Levites received the tithes and passed only a tenth (a tithe of the tithe) to the priests. (That suggests that at that time priests were about 10% of the tribe of Levi.) Also, under the law, the Levites lived in 48 Levitical cities – whereas here we have only a handful of Levites in total! Had the law been rewritten during this time as some argue, it would never have reached us in the form that we now have it.

“Nothing proves more clearly how mistaken is the view that in post-exilic times, the Torah was still being added to and revised.”

LESSON 35

Ezra 8:16-17

16 Then sent I for Eliezer, for Ariel, for Shemaiah, and for Elnathan, and for Jarib, and for Elnathan, and for Nathan, and for Zechariah, and for Meshullam, chief men; also for Joiarib, and for Elnathan, men of understanding. 17 And I sent them with commandment unto Iddo the chief at the place Casiphia, and I told them what they should say unto Iddo, and to his brethren the Nethinims, at the place Casiphia, that they should bring unto us ministers for the house of our God.

Some commentaries believe this list of names has been corrupted due to the fact that Elnathan is mentioned three times. But there is no need to reach that conclusion. More likely, there were just three people with the same name. (I was once on a conference call with five people -- four of whom were named Bob!)

Ezra sends 11 men (which, not being 12, should make the critics happy!) to go find some Levites. As for why he sent 11 rather than 12, perhaps it was because the tribe of Levi is missing! These 11 men are looking for Levites.

The 11 men include nine leaders or family heads and two interpreters. The leaders were no doubt intended to use their influence to convince some Levites to join them, while the interpreters (or “men of understanding”) were likely intended to use the law to persuade the Levites to accompany them to Jerusalem.

Ezra not only sent leaders and interpreters, but he even told them what to say. Ezra knew this mission was important, and so he left nothing to chance. That Ezra sent so many men suggests again that he thought it would be difficult to convince the Levites that they should return.

Verse 17 mentions “Iddo, the chief at the place Casiphia.” Who was Iddo and where was Casiphia?

Casiphia is related to the word “silver” and may have been named after a guild of silversmiths. Most likely a school was located there, and Iddo was the head of the school. And, for whatever reason, it seems that Ezra knew that Levites could be found there.

As for Casiphia, it is curious that the text makes a point of calling it a “place.” (Unless you are using the NIV, which for some reason failed to translate that word. It might make you wonder what else the NIV left out!) Some argue that the Hebrew word translated “place” actually refers to a sanctuary or a synagogue, which would further support the idea that this was a religious school. As we said earlier, many of the Levites had likely moved on to other professions after their deportation, but perhaps that was not true of all the Levites. Ezra was not just looking for Levites - he was looking for **faithful** Levites, and he knew that he could find them in Casiphia.

Ezra 8:18-20

18 And by the good hand of our God upon us they brought us a man of understanding, of the sons of Mahli, the son of Levi, the son of Israel; and Sherebiah, with his sons and his brethren, eighteen; 19 And Hashabiah, and with him Jeshaiah of the sons of Merari, his brethren and their sons, twenty; 20 Also of the Nethinims, whom David and the princes had appointed for the service of the Levites, two hundred and twenty Nethinims: all of them were expressed by name.

Ezra’s plan is successful, and verses 18-19 tell us that two independent Levitical families decide to accompany him to Jerusalem. The total number of returning Levites is 38.

Recall from before that the Levites were members of the tribe of Levi who were not also descendants of Aaron. They were prohibited from offering sacrifices on the altar. They were butchers, doorkeepers, singers, scribes, teachers, and sometimes even temple beggars.

Verse 20 tells us that 220 “Nethinims” or temple servants also accompanied Ezra. As we have discussed, the role of the temple servants was to assist the

Levites, and having such a large number may have been a factor in convincing these Levites to join them on their return.

Verse 20 points out the important role played by King David in organizing the priestly families. It is not clear at all why so many Nethinims were willing to return, when so many Levites were not.

Verse 20 suggests that Ezra had a list of their names, but (thankfully?!) that list is not given here. The purpose of the list was two-fold – to serve as a roll call on the trip back, and to record and confirm the Jewish ancestries of those who returned. (Ezra was a very organized leader!)

Adding everything up, the total number of those who returned with Ezra was about 1700 men plus women and children, perhaps close to 5000 people in total.

How does that number compare with the number who returned under Cyrus? It was a lot smaller!

Ezra 2:64 - The whole congregation together was forty and two thousand three hundred and threescore.

From 42,000 in the first return to only 5,000 in the second return - should the people have been discouraged by that decline?

We are about to see that Ezra's primary concern will be about the faithfulness of God's people in Jerusalem. So, with that as his primary concern, how do we think Ezra went about choosing people to accompany him? Do we think he put out the call for any and all, or do we think he wanted only faithful Jews to go back with him? If Ezra had come back with 42,000, but with only 5,000 of them faithful to God, don't we know that the problem of faithlessness he faced would have just been made worse?

There is a lesson for us here. We should not become preoccupied with numbers. Instead we should be preoccupied with faithfulness - and then the numbers will follow.

1 Corinthians 3:7 - So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.

We plant. We water. God gives the increase.

And we should remember that God's people have been in the majority only twice in the history of the world - right after creation, and right after the flood.

So, no, Ezra and the others who returned should not have been discouraged by the huge drop in numbers from the first return. Instead, they should have been thankful for the numbers they had and they should have focused on trusting God, obeying God, and being faithful to God in a difficult situation. And that is precisely what we see them doing in the closing chapters.

Ezra 8:21-23

21 Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance. 22 For I was ashamed to require of the king a band of soldiers and horsemen to help us against the enemy in the way: because we had spoken unto the king, saying, The hand of our God is upon all them for good that seek him; but his power and his wrath is against all them that forsake him. 23 So we fasted and besought our God for this: and he was intreated of us.

Verses 21-22 describe the preparations for the journey.

First, Ezra proclaims a fast as a way to seek God's protection for the hazardous journey.

Whether commanded or not, fasting by both Jew and Gentile in the Bible often occurs at times of great anxiety. David fasts while pleading for the life of his child in 2 Samuel 12:16. The people of Nineveh fast upon hearing news of the imminent judgment announced by the Lord in Jonah 3:5. Nehemiah fasts upon hearing the bad news concerning the state of the city of Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1:4. Darius fasts while Daniel is in the lions' den in Daniel 6:18.

Unlike the fasts we saw in Esther, we are told that this fast is accompanied by prayer. Specifically, the people ask God in verse 21 to grant them a safe

journey or “a right way,” literally a “straight road” (which is a bit funny given their plan to head north and then circle around and head south to avoid the desert!).

Verse 21 played a role in the history of the United States. When the Pilgrims left England for America in 1620, Ezra 8:21 was the text of the last sermon they heard before departing on their voyage.

Ezra 8:21 - Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river of Ahava, that we might afflict ourselves before our God, to seek of him a right way for us, and for our little ones, and for all our substance.

The phrase “our little ones” in verse 21 reminds us that entire families were returning with Ezra, but the Hebrew word can also refer to anyone who is weak, including the aged. Some may have stayed behind because of advanced age or ill health, but perhaps those excuses were not used by all who fell in those categories.

The reference to “our substance” in verse 21 is a reminder that the road was unsafe due to bandits and the nearby Egyptian rebellion.

This danger, as well as the reason for the fervent fasting and prayer, is highlighted in verse 22, where Ezra explains why he did not ask the king for a band of soldiers to accompany them, which was a question that was perhaps being asked by some who were going back with him.

Ezra had told the King that God would protect them, and so to ask for soldiers would have indicated a lack of faith on his part. But, in ancient times (and likely as well as in modern times!), the roads between Babylon and Judah were teeming with gangs of bandits. And this group was loaded down with gold and silver.

Some commentators try to pit Ezra against Nehemiah, and they point to these verses as a jab by Ezra against Nehemiah, who traveled with a military escort in Nehemiah 2:9.

But the two missions were different. Ezra's mission was religious, while Nehemiah was sent as a political official, a governor, to Judah. Nehemiah was likely given no choice about having a military escort.

And I'm not saying that we should question Ezra's decision here to refuse the king's protection, but God was already using the Persian king to allow his people to return, so why not also use the Persian soldiers to allow his people to return safely?

In any event, God answered their prayers – he listened to their entreaty in verse 23 - and they arrived safely without the Persian troops.

“There are times when faith must take on flesh, when what is professed must be expressed in concrete situations. There are those times when we must reject all visible human help and risk all on God alone. When could we possibly be safer? But we often don't view it that way. We are like the terrified lady onboard ship in a terrific storm. She happened to pass the captain and asked, 'Is there any hope, Captain?' to which he responded, 'Our only hope is in God.' She turned more pale and gasped, 'Are things really that bad?'"

Ezra 8:24-27

24 Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, Sherebiah, Hashabiah, and ten of their brethren with them, 25 And weighed unto them the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, even the offering of the house of our God, which the king, and his counsellors, and his lords, and all Israel there present, had offered: 26 I even weighed unto their hand six hundred and fifty talents of silver, and silver vessels an hundred talents, and of gold an hundred talents; 27 Also twenty basons of gold, of a thousand drams; and two vessels of fine copper, precious as gold.

A better translation of verse 24 is: “I separated twelve men as well as Sherebiah and Hashabiah and with them from their kinsmen, ten men.”

It is clear from 8:18-19 that Sherebiah and Hashabiah are Levites, and so what verse 24 is telling us is that Ezra chose 12 priests and 12 Levites. This choice by Ezra may confirm that Ezra was fond of the number 12, which could then explain why he chose 12 families earlier.

These priests and Levites are assigned to be treasure bearers.

In the Law, the priests and Levites were given the responsibility of caring for the furnishings of the tabernacle. The priests handled the sacred objects and cared for them while the Levites carried them without touching them. In this passage, these groups are essentially given the same responsibility with the silver, the gold, and the temple vessels instead of with the furnishings.

Verses 25-27 describe a staggering amount of wealth.

A Babylonian talent weighed approximately 75 pounds, and so 650 silver talents and 100 gold talents together weighed almost 30 tons! The silver vessels weighed over 7,000 pounds. Also mentioned are 1,000 darics or “drams.” A Persian daric was a thick gold coin that was named after the Persian king Darius.

Ezra carefully weighs the silver and gold to make sure that none of it is lost.

Many commentators have questioned the amount of treasure detailed here. But, as we have already seen, the Persian kings had tremendous wealth and enjoyed displaying it.

We should also keep in mind God’s role in this return – if God wanted his people to return loaded down with Persian treasure, then that is what was going to happen – and that is what did happen! (Although these gifts will be called a “freewill offering” in verse 28.)

This great wealth also reminds us of Ezra’s decision not to use a military escort – a decision that must have astonished (and perhaps worried) the king and the other Persians in view of the great treasure they were carrying.

Ezra 8:28-30

28 And I said unto them, Ye are holy unto the LORD; the vessels are holy also; and the silver and the gold are a freewill offering unto the LORD God of your fathers. 29 Watch ye, and keep them, until ye weigh them before the chief of the priests and the Levites, and chief of the fathers of Israel, at

Jerusalem, in the chambers of the house of the LORD. 30 So took the priests and the Levites the weight of the silver, and the gold, and the vessels, to bring them to Jerusalem unto the house of our God.

These verses record the instructions that Ezra gave to the treasure bearers.

Ezra first tells the treasure bearers that they are “holy unto the Lord,” which means that they had been set apart for a divine purpose.

This was something with which the priests were already very familiar.

Exodus 28:36 - “You shall make a plate of pure gold and engrave on it, like the engraving of a signet, ‘Holy to the LORD.’”

But here Ezra applies it to the Levites as well. And, in fact, in verse 2 of the next chapter, Ezra will apply it to all the people, calling them “the holy race.”

Of course, these descriptions remind us of our descriptions and of God’s commands to us in the New Testament.

1 Peter 1:15-16 - But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

1 Peter 2:9 - But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, **a holy nation**, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Ezra then tells the treasure bearers to carefully protect (“watch and keep” in verse 29) the valuables. Literally, the text reads, “be awake and keep.” They were not to fall asleep on the job!

And, again, we are reminded of a New Testament passage. We, too, must guard a great treasure.

1 Timothy 6:20 - O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.

As we noted earlier, these gifts in Ezra 8 are called here “a freewill offering” unto God in verse 28. Yes, these gifts were part of God’s plan for his people, but these gifts had not been coerced.

The priests' and Levites' assignment to guard the treasure was to last until they were able to weigh out the treasure in the chambers of the temple in Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:31-34

31 Then we departed from the river of Ahava on the twelfth day of the first month, to go unto Jerusalem: and the hand of our God was upon us, and he delivered us from the hand of the enemy, and of such as lay in wait by the way. 32 And we came to Jerusalem, and abode there three days. 33 Now on the fourth day was the silver and the gold and the vessels weighed in the house of our God by the hand of Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest; and with him was Eleazar the son of Phinehas; and with them was Jozabad the son of Jeshua, and Noadiah the son of Binnui, Levites; 34 By number and by weight of every one: and all the weight was written at that time.

Verse 31 helps us with the chronology of these events.

Back in Ezra 7:9, we saw that the exiles assembled at the river on the first day of the first month. That was the official beginning of the journey.

But they did not leave on the first day. Instead, they stayed by the river while they searched for the Levites and did the other things Ezra just told us about.

Finally, as we see here in verse 31, they began their long journey from the river to Jerusalem on the 12th day of the first month.

Is there any special significance of the 12th day of the first month? It is two days before the Passover.

Leviticus 23:5 - In the fourteenth day of the first month at even is the LORD'S passover.

That Ezra left on the 12th day (rather than wait until after Passover) tells us how anxious he must have been to reach Jerusalem.

Ezra 7:9 tells us they arrived on the first day of the fifth month.

Verse 31 tells us that they were delivered from enemies and ambushes along the way. The Hebrew used here does not mean that unsuccessful ambushes

occurred, but more likely means that God made sure that the exiles were never attacked at all during their journey to Jerusalem.

There are many proofs of the divine origin of the Bible, but one of those proofs is the understatement that we often find in God's word. We have an example of that here in verse 32.

If I had written the book of Ezra, and if I had experienced a dangerous and circuitous 900 mile trek journey with 5000 people and tons of gold and silver to reach a city that I had heard about all my life but never seen with my own eyes, how would I have written about those events? How many chapters would I have devoted to that long and difficult trip?

Here is how Ezra describes it by inspiration in verse 32: "And we came to Jerusalem." Not much of a travel log, but it certainly gets the point across!

After resting for three days, the first thing the people did was weigh the silver and the gold to confirm that none of it was missing.

Why the three day wait? Perhaps this was just a time of rest following the rigorous journey. It is also possible that they arrived late in the week and waited until the Sabbath was over before weighing out the valuables, an activity that would have been considered work.

The valuables were weighed out to the priest Meremoth, the son of Uriah. Ezra most likely had to send to King Artaxerxes signed certification that these treasures had been received in the temple.

There is something possibly very interesting that we can conclude about Meremoth. Here he is called the son of Uriah, but we get a little more information about him from Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 3:4 - And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired.

Now where have we seen Hakkoz before? The answer is that we saw him back in Ezra 2, where he had been among those priests who were unable to prove their lineage.

Ezra 2:61-63 - Also, of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, **the sons of Hakkoz**, and the sons of Barzillai (who had taken a wife from the daughters of Barzillai the Gileadite, and was called by their name). These sought their registration among those enrolled in the genealogies, but they were not found there, and so they were excluded from the priesthood as unclean. The governor told them that they were not to partake of the most holy food, until there should be a priest to consult Urim and Thummim.

Evidently, the family of Hakkoz had been accepted as priests when they were evaluated by the priest with the Urim and the Thummim, and by this time that family had produced one of the leading priests of the temple.

Accompanying Meremoth was Eleazar, the son of Phinehas. It is possible that this is the same Eleazar from Nehemiah 12:42, who was one of the priests who led the dedication of the walls of Jerusalem.

Ezra 8:35-36

35 Also the children of those that had been carried away, which were come out of the captivity, offered burnt offerings unto the God of Israel, twelve bullocks for all Israel, ninety and six rams, seventy and seven lambs, twelve he goats for a sin offering: all this was a burnt offering unto the LORD. 36 And they delivered the king's commissions unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors on this side the river: and they furthered the people, and the house of God.

With verses 35-36, the narrative switches back to the third person. (“I” and “we” become “those” and “they.”)

In 7:17, Artaxerxes commanded that certain offerings be made, and here in 8:35 we see that command being carried out.

The offering included 12 bulls, 96 rams, 77 lambs, and 12 goats. Why those numbers?

We know that Ezra was fond of the number 12, and for good reason! The number 12 is used from Genesis to Revelation as a symbol for the people of God. And, as with many symbols, the symbolic meaning comes from a literal meaning. There were literally 12 patriarchs and literally 12 apostles, and so the number 12 is a perfect figure for God's people under either covenant. And perhaps it also comes from the combination of three (the figurative number for God) with the number four (the figurative number for God's creation).

How are these numbers related to the number 12?

The number 96 is 12 times 8, and 8 is the figurative number for renewal (the eighth day being the first day of a new week). So perhaps the number 96 was chosen to depict the renewed situation of God's people. But, again, the number 96 would then have both a literal meaning and a figurative meaning.

What about 77? That one is harder to explain. Some argue that 77 should be 72, which is also divisible by 12, being 12 times 6. The number 6 denotes something that falls short of perfection, and so perhaps the number 72 might point to the greater temple that was yet to come in Christ. But, again, the text here does not say 72 - it says 77!

Perhaps the most likely explanation for why we have 96 rams and 77 lambs is that there were 96 rams and 77 lambs! Perhaps we should not strain to find some figurative meaning for those numbers, although the 12 bulls and the 12 goats were likely chosen for their symbolic significance.

The plural "satraps" in verse 36 ("lieutenants" in the KJV) is seen by some as a problem. Why? Because Trans-Euphrates or Beyond the River was a single satrap. Some suggest that the phrase also includes the Egyptian satrap, which was nearby and which also had a substantial Jewish population.

But I think the best explanation is to notice the text is referring here to a person (satraps) and not a place (a satrapy). A single satrapy could have had multiple satraps.

The final phrase in Chapter 8 is particularly important: “they furthered the people, and the house of God.” Yes, Ezra has God on his side, but Ezra also has Persia on his side! And, of course, that is true only because Ezra has God on his side. God is behind all of this, and God made sure that Ezra had all of the help he needed to accomplish his mission.

But perhaps we should pause and consider the delicate situation into which Ezra had been placed here. Yes, Persia supported Ezra, but what if Persia asked Ezra for something that was opposed to what God wanted Ezra to do? We know how Ezra would have responded to that, but what about ourselves?

Yes, persecution from the government is a terrible thing, but perhaps we should be more fearful of an embrace from the government. When did the most terrible heresies in the early church occur - when the church was being persecuted by Rome, or later when the church was being embraced by Rome? Perhaps we could ask a **Roman** Catholic!

We need to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29), and we need to do that without regard to whether those men are persecuting us or embracing us.

LESSON 36

Ezra 9:1-2

Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. 2 For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass.

In verses 1-2, the princes approach Ezra to tell him about a problem involving foreign marriages.

Already Ezra's campaign to teach people the Law was bearing "the characteristic fruit of reform." That is, the people had been taught the word of God, and that word had been "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness!" (2 Timothy 3:16)

Apparently, these same princes had either not tried to solve the problem themselves or had tried but had been unable to solve the problem themselves prior to Ezra's arrival. And perhaps a big reason for the failure of the princes to correct the problem is revealed in verse 2 - some of the princes were the chief offenders!

Who were these princes? Most likely they were the family leaders of the descendants of the Jews who had returned 80 years earlier under Sheshbazzar.

Four months have passed since they arrived. Ezra 10:9 will tell us that we are now in the 9th month, and Ezra 7:8 tells us that Ezra arrived in the 5th month.

That timing creates a big question for us: why did it take so long for Ezra to notice the foreign marriages? And, in fact, the question is even bigger than

that because Ezra did not notice this problem himself, but rather Ezra was told about this problem, and we will see Ezra's shock and dismay in verse 3.

Why the delay, and why did Ezra fail to see a problem that would seem to be very evident? Had Ezra had his head buried in his scrolls?

I think the first few words in verse 1 answer our questions - "now when these things were done." What things?

Those things likely included the delivery of the commissions to the satraps and the governors that we saw in Ezra 8:36. And how long did that take? Possibly about four months, and particularly if there were a number of satraps located far apart whom Ezra needed to visit.

The most likely explanation for the delay is that Ezra had been traveling after his arrival to visit the officials in the surrounding areas, and Ezra had just now returned four months later. And most likely Ezra had left some behind to begin teaching the law to the people, which would then explain the turnaround we are seeing here.

So let's move on to our next logical question: what was wrong with these foreign marriages? That question is easy to answer.

For starters, marriages between the Israelites and certain foreign nations were specifically prohibited under the Law of Moses.

Exodus 34:11-16 - Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, **and you take of their daughters for your sons**, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods.

Deuteronomy 7:1-4 - When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations

before you, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than yourselves, and when the LORD your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them. **You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods.** Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

And not only do these passages prohibit these foreign marriages, but they also supply the reason for the prohibition – the foreign marriages would turn the Jews away from following God.

The influence of the foreign wife would turn the husband and the children to her foreign gods and would introduce her foreign worship and idolatry into the worship of God. And, of course, we see that very thing happening over and over again throughout the Old Testament.

The issue here was not an issue of racial purity but rather was an issue of religious purity.

How do we know it was not a racial issue?

Because Joseph had an Egyptian wife, because Moses married a Midianite and a Cushite, and because Ruth, a Moabitess, and Rahab, a Canaanite, hold honored positions in Jesus' genealogy.

God accepted marriages to foreign **believers**. The problem was when the marriage was to a foreign **unbeliever**. Such foreign wives could and often did lead the people away to foreign gods, particularly when, as here, the problem had become so widespread.

The phrase "holy seed" in verse 2 also shows us that the issue was one of religion rather than one of race – God's concern was not just for seed, but rather was for **holy** seed. That phrase is a clear link to the phrase "holy people" that is used throughout Deuteronomy in reference to the Israelites (7:6; 14:2, 21; 28:9).

Deuteronomy 7:6 - For thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.

Now that we have looked at one hot button issue (race), let's look at another hot button issue (gender)!

The emphasis here in Ezra is on the fact that the male Jews had married female foreigners. Why the emphasis on foreign women? Had no Jewish women married foreign unbelieving men?

First, even today, mothers often have a greater influence on their children's religion than do fathers. Later Jewish tradition decreed that a Jew is one who is born of a Jewish mother. (Remember Timothy in Acts 16:1-3.) That ruling was not because of the blood of the child but rather was because it was the mothers who raised the children.

Second, a Jewish woman who married a foreigner would leave to become part of his nationality and to adopt his gods. What that means is that it was very unlikely that there were many or even any foreign unbelieving men with Jewish wives who were still a part of the Jewish community. Those women had all left already, and while that was not good, there was not much Ezra could do about it.

Let's drill down a bit on the specific foreign peoples who are listed in verse 1. The list in verse 1 is similar to those we saw earlier in Exodus and Deuteronomy: the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites.

Who were these nations? And as we answer that question, let's keep in mind that it was from these groups that some of the Jewish men were getting their wives!

The first group mentioned is the Canaanites.

The Canaanites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham. The Canaanites lived along the eastern Mediterranean coastal regions from Egypt

to Lebanon (Numbers 13:29). Their most significant impact on Israel came in the area of religion. The chief god of the Canaanites was Baal, and the Canaanite fertility cult has been called “the most immoral and vile religion known to man.” The Canaanites worshiped their gods by engaging in sexual immorality involving male and female prostitutes and by sacrificing their children. Israel’s worship of Baal seems to have been the most significant sin among those that led to the nation’s deportation (Jeremiah 11:17; Hosea 2:1-13; 11:2; Zephaniah 1:4).

The second group mentioned is the Hittites.

The Hittites were the descendants of Heth, the son of Canaan (Genesis 10:15). The Hittites dominated Asia Minor, and groups of Hittites migrated south, eventually settling in the hill country of Canaan near the city of Hebron (Genesis 23:19; Numbers 13:29). Notable Hittites include Ephron, from whom Abraham purchased a burial site (Genesis 23), and Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11:1). Esau married two Hittites (Genesis 26:34), and Solomon had Hittite women in his harem (1 Kings 11:1).

The third group mentioned is the Perizzites.

The origin of the Perizzites is unknown. They first appear in Genesis 13:7, where they are simply identified as dwelling in the land of Canaan along with the Canaanites at the time of Abraham. During the period of the judges they lived in the heavily forested region near Mount Ephraim in the territory allotted to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (Joshua 17:15).

The fourth group mentioned is the Jebusites.

The Jebusites were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 10:16). They lived in the hill country (Numbers 13:29) and were the original inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jebusite Jerusalem was taken by King David in about 1004 BC. During the period of the judges, the Jebusites lived in the general region of Jerusalem in the territory allotted to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Notable Jebusites include Adoni-zedek, the king of Jerusalem who

formed the alliance against Gibeon (Joshua 10:1-4), and Araunah (also known as Ornan), from whom David bought the threshing floor that would become the site of Solomon's temple (2 Samuel 24:16-24; 1 Chronicles 21:14-27). If Salem is identified as Jerusalem, then Melchizedek may have been a Jebusite (Genesis 14:18).

The fifth group mentioned is the Ammonites.

The Ammonites were the descendants of Ben-ammi, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his younger daughter. The Ammonites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The earliest documentation of hostilities between the Ammonites and the Israelites is the record of Judges 3:12-14, where the Ammonites join the coalition formed by Eglon, king of Moab. Jephthah later defeated an unnamed king of Ammon (Judges 11). Notable Ammonites include Naamah, the wife of Solomon and mother of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:21, 31; 2 Chronicles 12:13), and Tobiah, one of the major antagonists of Nehemiah (Nehemiah 2:19; 4:3). Solomon built a sanctuary for Molech, the "detestable" chief god of the Ammonites, on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:7). Child sacrifice was a significant part of the Ammonite Molech cult (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 32:35).

The sixth group mentioned is the Moabites.

The Moabites were the descendants of Moab, the son of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his older daughter. The Moabites lived on the eastern side of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, just to the south of the Ammonites. The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh (1 Kings 11:7, 33). The worship of Chemosh included a priesthood (Jeremiah 48:7) and a sacrificial system (Numbers 22:40; 25:2). Solomon married Moabite women and built a sanctuary for Chemosh on the Mount of Olives (1 Kings 11:1, 7). Notable Moabites include: Balak, the king who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-24); Eglon, the king who was assassinated by Ehud (Judges 3:15-30); Ruth, the widow of Mahlon and wife of Boaz (Ruth 4:10, 13); and Mesha, the king who rebelled against King Jehoram of Israel (2 Kings 3).

The seventh group mentioned is the Egyptians.

The most significant feature of the land of Egypt is the Nile River. In fact, Egypt is often called “the gift of the Nile.” Because the Nile River flows from south to north, southern Egypt is known as Upper Egypt while northern Egypt is known as Lower Egypt.

The Egyptians may be the descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. The land of Egypt is sometimes identified as the land of Ham in the Old Testament (Psalm 78:51; 105:23, 27; 106:22). Like Israel, Egypt was a land of religion. Herodotus wrote: “They [the Egyptians] are beyond measure religious, more than any other nation. ... Their religious observances are, one might say, innumerable.”

The chief god of the Egyptians was Ra, the sun god. However, many other gods were routinely worshiped including Osiris, god of the Nile, and Isis, goddess of children. And, of course, they considered the Pharaohs to be gods. Notable Egyptians include Shishak, the pharaoh who invaded Israel during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25-26), and Neco, the pharaoh who met Josiah in battle at Megiddo, a battle in which Josiah was fatally shot by the Egyptian archers (2 Kings 23:29; 2 Chronicles 35:22-23).

The eighth and final group mentioned is the Amorites.

They were the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham (Genesis 10:16). The Amorites lived to the west of Mesopotamia and so were called “westerners.” The Amorites had their origins in Syria and migrated south into the land of Canaan. The Amorites lived in the hill country on both sides of the Jordan River (Numbers 13:29; Joshua 5:1). The so-called King’s Highway traversed their territory (Numbers 21:21-22). They were largely nomadic shepherds, supplying sheep and goats to the Canaanite cities. Notable Amorites include Sihon and Og, two kings who were defeated by the Israelites on their way to the promised land (Numbers 21).

Why did we spend so much time talking about these peoples? Because it is important to know who they were and what they believed as we approach the

final scene in this book, which involves a punishment that (absent this background information) some might consider overly harsh.

So where are we then at the end of verse 2? Ezra has just been told about the problem of intermarriage that was occurring among the remnant in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. The idolatry that led to the exile had been caused in large part by the idolatry that had come in through intermarriage, and here are God's people once again engaged in intermarriage with idolaters. How will Ezra react to that news? We see that starting in verse 3?

Ezra 9:3-4

3 And when I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle, and plucked off the hair of my head and of my beard, and sat down astonished. 4 Then were assembled unto me every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the transgression of those that had been carried away; and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice.

These verses show us the effect that the news of the people's infidelity had on Ezra – he tore his garments, he pulled out his hair, and he sat down astonished (dumbfounded, overcome, or appalled). Ezra was certainly not apathetic when it came to sin, and he wanted everyone around him to know that.

Why was Ezra so upset by their sin? It seems that many of the others, including at least some of the leaders, were not upset at all. Why was Ezra different?

Because Ezra understood the seriousness of sin. Sin such as this was the reason the Jews had been exiled in the first place – and here they were doing it again! Ezra must have wondered if the people would ever learn!

But why did Ezra understand this, while many and perhaps most of the others did not? Because Ezra studied the law, and he knew the law.

If we don't take sin seriously today, is it perhaps because we don't study and know the word of God? Perhaps our view of the seriousness of sin is directly proportional to our knowledge and understanding of God's word. That certainly seems to have been the case with Ezra.

How do we react to sin? Do we just shrug our shoulders and write it off as just human nature, or do we react like Ezra did? Are we astonished by sin?

We can see a big difference here between Ezra and Nehemiah.

When Ezra hears about this sin, he pulls out his own hair in verse 3. In Nehemiah 13:25, here is how Nehemiah responded when he, too, was faced with the same problem: “And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off **their** hair.” **Ezra pulls out his own hair while Nehemiah pulls out the hair of the offenders!**

I suppose there is a time to pull out your own hair, and a time to pull out other people’s hair! (Although I don’t remember seeing hair-pulling anywhere on the list in Ecclesiastes 3!)

Ezra sat where he was until the time of the evening sacrifice (about 3 PM), and this reference to the evening sacrifice suggests that Ezra had probably taken a seat near the temple. That is, Ezra had intentionally positioned himself in a public place so that the people could see his grief.

Ezra was joined by those who realized that the Jews were in danger of once again suffering the judgment of God. The phrase “every one that trembled at the words of the God of Israel” in verse 4 refers to those who were attempting to live according to the Law of Moses.

Isaiah 66:2 – But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

Earlier we asked whether we are astonished by sin. Now we can ask whether we tremble at the word of God. I suspect the answers to those two questions are the same.

So where are we at the end of verse 4? Ezra is upset. Ezra is overcome. Ezra is worried. So what does Ezra do? Ezra prays.

Ezra 9:5-7

5 And at the evening sacrifice I arose up from my heaviness; and having rent my garment and my mantle, I fell upon my knees, and spread out my hands unto the LORD my God, 6 And said, O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens. 7 Since the days of our fathers have we been in a great trespass unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to a spoil, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.

In verse 5, Ezra, falls upon his knees and spreads out his hands unto God.

Verses 6-15 give us Ezra's prayer, and his prayer is centered around two things - a confession of sin and the importance of the Jewish remnant.

We can compare this prayer of Ezra in Ezra 9 to the great prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9 and to the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9. (Chapter 9 seems to be the prayer chapter!)

Confession of sin is a major theme of this prayer.

We see a first confession of sin in verses 6-7, and we will see a second confession of sin later in verses 10-14.

Ezra uses two metaphors in verse 6 to describe their sin – “for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens.”

The switch from the first person singular in verse 6 (“I am ashamed”) to the first person plural in verses 6-7 (“our iniquities are increased” and “we been in a great trespass”) is interesting.

Ezra identifies himself with his people and with the sin of his people. Ezra did not come into Jerusalem to accuse them as an outsider – Ezra was instead standing with the people and describing their sins as “our” sins and “our” guilt. This scribe was praying the Publican's Prayer!

In verse 7, Ezra looks back through their history – and Ezra recognizes that it has been a history of sin and rebellion against God. And Ezra understands that their exile had been caused by that sin and rebellion.

“It is as if Ezra has realized that immediately in front of him are all the cumulative iniquities which have heaped up through history. What an extraordinary view of sin!”

The phrase “the kings of the lands” in verse 7 is a reference to the kings of Assyria and Babylon who were used by God to exile and scatter his people.

God’s judgment of the Jews in verse 7 is described as including warfare (“sword”), exile (“captivity”), the loss of their possessions (“spoil”), and the loss of their national pride (“confusion of face”). And in verse 7, Ezra tells us that their humiliation was continuing to this very day.

Humiliation by foreign kings was nothing new for the Jews and would continue to be nothing new. After the conquest by Babylon, the Jews were under the rule of the Persians, under the rule of Alexander the Great, under the rule of the Ptolemies, under the rule of the Seleucids, under the rule of the Romans, under the rule of the Byzantines, under the rule of the Arabs, under the rule of the Turks, and under the rule of the British. The Jews have enjoyed only two periods of independence after their exile by Nebuchadnezzar: their modern state (since 1948) and from 165 to 63 BC following the Maccabean Revolt. One of those (and only one of those) is mentioned in the Bible - the Maccabean revolt, which is found, for example, in the great prophecy of Daniel 11.

In verse 6, Ezra says, “I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God.”

While Ezra was blushing because of the sins of others, Jeremiah 6:15 describes a people who did not blush even about their own sin.

Jeremiah 6:15 - Were they ashamed when they had committed abomination? nay, they were not at all ashamed, neither could they blush.

Into which category do we fall? Into which category does our society fall?

That second question is easy. We live in a society that has been taught from a young age to never feel any shame – and we are now reaping that whirlwind. We live in a society that does not know how to blush.

In 1939, a single four-letter word in the movie “Gone With the Wind” made the entire nation blush. That was 84 years ago. What does it take to make this nation blush today? Do we even know? Where will this nation be 84 years from today?

Our mission as the Lord’s church is to proclaim the gospel to the world. But no one will ever believe the good news until they first believe the bad news – and the bad news is that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and the wages of sin is death.

Why would anyone pay any attention to the gospel if that person does not believe he has ever sinned? Perhaps that more than anything explains why the gospel seems to fall on deaf ears these days – more so than at any time in our recent history.

We need to follow Ezra’s example and blush both for our own sin and for the sins that are heaped up all around us in this sin-soaked world. If we in the church ever forget how to blush – who is left?

Ezra 9:8-9

8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage. 9 For we were bondmen; yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.

In verses 8-9, Ezra comes back to their current situation under the Persian kings. During the time of the Babylonian kings, the Jews had no hope of returning to Judah, but that situation changed when the Persian Empire took over.

The “little space” or “brief moment” in verse 8 was a period of about 80 years (from 538 to 458) starting with the decree of Cyrus during which the people had been allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Ezra understood that that door could close at any time. Yes, God opens doors, **but God also closes doors**. We should not presume those open doors will remain open forever, especially if we fail to walk through them.

We know of one great open door that is open now (the gates of the church in Revelation 21:25) but that door will close with a permanent thud on the final day of judgment when the day of repentance will be over forever. And that is not the only door that God will close. God opens doors and closes door today as well – and we need to use those open doors while they remain open.

In verse 8, Ezra also recognizes that they were a remnant, and that God had spared that remnant for a purpose.

And they were in fact just a remnant. Perhaps a few hundred thousand Jews lived in Israel during the time of Ezra. Millions had been killed or carried away into captivity by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

The phrase “remnant to escape” in verse 8 suggests that this remnant included only those Jews who had escaped from the exile and who had returned to Judah. That is, the phrase suggests that those Jews who remained behind were not considered part of this remnant, at least not in the eyes of Ezra.

But perhaps Ezra considered those who remained behind and who were faithful to God to be a different remnant - keeping in mind that Ezra himself had been in that group up until recently, and Nehemiah was still in that group.

But why would Ezra single out the exiles as a remnant within a remnant? The entire remnant was faithful to God because that is what it means to be a remnant, but the remnant in Jerusalem had come out of the exile, and that, I think, is the key point here.

This remnant includes those who had separated themselves and come out from the exile, and that is true of the remnant today as well.

2 Corinthians 6:17 - Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you.

Verse 8 also mentions the “secure hold” or “foothold” that God had given this remnant. The KJV used the word “nail.” The literal Hebrew term is “tent peg,” and it refers to a place where a nomad could pitch his tent after a long journey.

“A little grace had been granted by God to his people; a small remnant had found its weary way back to its home and driven a single peg into the soil; a solitary ray of light was shining; a faint breath of freedom lightened their slavery.”

And again there is a question for us in Ezra’s prayer. Where have we driven our tent peg? Where is our nail planted?

Hebrews 6:19 - Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.

Finally, verse 8 says that their eyes were brightened and that they were revived in their slavery. The people were dead while in exile, but now they had been revived. Yet many Jews remained in exile, which Ezra describes as slavery in verse 9. And yet again we can see a parallel with our own situation.

Galatians 5:1 - Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.

But verse 9 also tells us that God had not forsaken them, even in their slavery, but “hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia.” God had demonstrated his love to them even while they were in exile. And what about us?

Romans 5:8 - But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

We often say that we can find Jesus on every page in the Old Testament. On this page, Jesus is in every verse!

In this return from exile we see a beautiful prefiguring of the gospel of Christ – and when we read the prophecies of Zechariah I think we can see that this was one of the big lessons that God wanted his people to learn from the exile. Someone was coming!

LESSON 37

Verse 9 reminds us that this remnant had a purpose: “to set up the house of our God, and to repair the desolations thereof, and to give us a wall in Judah and in Jerusalem.”

Some argue, based on this verse, that the temple had been destroyed during the reign of Xerxes and was rebuilt again during the time of Ezra, but most likely the rebuilding in verse 9 refers to the earlier rebuilding under Cyrus and Darius (which all occurred during the “little space” of verse 8).

Some have argued from the use of the word “wall” in verse 9 that when Ezra arrived the wall around the city must have already been constructed. From this they argue that Ezra must have arrived **after** Nehemiah built the wall, and they rearrange the chronology accordingly.

But there are several problems with that view.

First, Ezra was in fact rebuilding the physical wall. Remember what we saw in Chapter 4, when Ezra went forward in time to show examples of hostility from their neighbors. One of those examples was a letter that their neighbors wrote to King Artaxerxes (the current king) that caused him to stop work on the wall. They did more than stop work on the wall, they destroyed the wall. That wall was being built by Ezra. The destruction of that wall was the report that Nehemiah received in Nehemiah 1:3 that led to his own return. So, the fact that Ezra mentions a wall does not mean that Ezra showed up after Nehemiah.

But, second, the word translated “wall” here is the Hebrew word for “fence,” and it does not usually refer to a city wall, but rather refers to a stone fence that forms a border between property owners. It simply means a protected area. In fact, that usage seems likely here from how the word is used in verse 9 – “to give us a wall **in Judea** and Jerusalem.” How could a city wall have been built around all of Judea? A better translation of that phrase may be the one found in the ESV: “and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.”

Ezra 9:10-12

10 And now, O our God, what shall we say after this? for we have forsaken thy commandments, 11 Which thou hast commanded by thy servants the prophets, saying, The land, unto which ye go to possess it, is an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness. 12 Now therefore give not your daughters unto their sons, neither take their daughters unto your sons, nor seek their peace or their wealth for ever: that ye may be strong, and eat the good of the land, and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever.

Verses 10-12 of Ezra's prayer are directed to Ezra's listeners as well as to God, causing one commentator to describe the prayer as a "sermon prayer."

Ezra wanted the people to understand that all the disasters that had befallen them as a people had happened because of their disobedience to God's commands, and so Ezra uses the language of the Bible to help them understand that crucial point.

I have heard criticism of public prayers that some are more like sermons than like prayers and that some quote the Bible back to God even though God wrote the Bible. This one prayer from Ezra 9 shows us that neither of these criticisms is valid. Ezra's prayer looks a lot like a sermon - yes, Ezra was speaking to God, but Ezra was also speaking to those who were hearing his prayer. And Ezra's prayer quotes the Bible back to God - as do many other prayers in the Bible. If I am limited in my prayers to telling God only those things that he does not know, then I'm not going to be able to say much in my prayers! And, even today, we can often tell from someone's prayer how well that person knows and loves the word of God!

Getting back to the content of Ezra's prayer, it is a sad commentary on our own modern society that the description in verse 11 is a very accurate description of our own country in its present state:

"an unclean land with the filthiness of the people of the lands, with their abominations, which have filled it from one end to another with their uncleanness."

That is the land in which we live. The question is whether we will change that unclean land by proclaiming the gospel of Christ, or whether we will be changed by that unclean land. That was the issue in Ezra's day. That is still the issue in our own day. Will we change the world, or will we be changed by the world?

Which of the commandments of God had the people forsaken? The examples that Ezra gives in verses 11-12 come from Genesis, Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Lamentations, 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, although the texts are not literally quoted.

Ezra 9:13-15

13 And after all that is come upon us for our evil deeds, and for our great trespass, seeing that thou our God hast punished us less than our iniquities deserve, and hast given us such deliverance as this; 14 Should we again break thy commandments, and join in affinity with the people of these abominations? wouldst not thou be angry with us till thou hadst consumed us, so that there should be no remnant nor escaping? 15 O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.

In verses 13-15, Ezra again focuses on the remnant.

Despite all that had happened to the Jews, Ezra understood that they had been punished far less than their iniquities deserved. They deserved death, but God had given them life. Where is the gospel in the Old Testament? A better question might be where isn't it!

Romans 6:23 - For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

God had earlier considered destroying the people and starting over instead with Moses.

Exodus 32:9-10 - And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.

But God did not do that. The fact that the remnant even existed in the days of Ezra was itself evidence of God's love and God's grace. Absent that love and absent that grace, the Jews would have been destroyed long before.

But if this remnant sinned and rebelled, then it, too, was in danger of being destroyed. But even then God's plan would have continued. God could find another remnant – there were communities of Jews scattered all around, even down in Egypt.

In verse 15, Ezra says that “**we** cannot stand before thee because of this.”

The sin of some of the people was the responsibility of all the people, with the result that none of the people (Ezra included) could stand.

1 Corinthians 5:6-7 - Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened.

A little leaven had leavened the whole lump. It was now Ezra's job to “clean out the old leaven” by taking steps to purify the remnant.

There is a clear message here for us: remnants have responsibilities!

The Lord's church is also a remnant. Do we understand what that means? Do we understand our own responsibilities? If the Lord's church turns its back on God's word, then who will be left? Will we cause God to look elsewhere for a faithful remnant?

Luke 18:8 - Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

It is our responsibility to make sure the answer to that question is yes! If we don't take on that responsibility, who will?

Ezra 10:1

1 Now when Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God, there assembled unto him

out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children: for the people wept very sore.

Verse 1 brings us back to the situation described in 9:3-5 and tells us what happened at the temple after Ezra's prayer.

Notice that while Ezra 9 speaks of Ezra in the first person, Ezra 10 speaks of Ezra in the third person. Why the switch?

We don't know for sure, but one commentary suggests that this back and forth shift may have been intended to let the reader see the events from different perspectives. Another suggests that "the shift occurs to highlight the shared responsibility for the divorces among the various groups that supported the decision."

While Ezra prayed, he lay prostrate and weeping. "Casting himself down" in the Hebrew means that Ezra kept "casting himself down" to the ground.

This activity caused a crowd to gather, no doubt wondering what had caused this important official to behave this way. By the time the prayer was completed and the events in Chapter 10 began, we are told that a very large crowd had gathered.

Ezra's emotional state infected those around him, and by the end of verse 1 they were also weeping bitterly. Most had heard all or part of Ezra's prayer, so they knew what was causing his great distress.

Ezra 10:2-4

2 And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, answered and said unto Ezra, We have trespassed against our God, and have taken strange wives of the people of the land: yet now there is hope in Israel concerning this thing. 3 Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them, according to the counsel of my lord, and of those that tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. 4 Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it.

Shecaniah speaks out in verses 2-4. He was likely a leader of the people, as well as someone who agreed with Ezra over the problem of intermarriage. He also held Ezra in high esteem, calling him “my lord” in verse 3.

Shecaniah is identified in verse 2 as the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam. There are several other Shecaniahs mentioned in Ezra and Nehemiah, but it is difficult to identify this Shecaniah with any of them. The length of Shecaniah’s genealogy in verse 2 indicates that he was a person of some importance.

From Chapter 2 we know that the family of Elam had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. This family is also mentioned in 8:7 and 10:26, suggesting it was one of the more significant families among the returned exiles.

Note that Shecaniah uses the first person plural (“**we** have trespassed”) much like Ezra did in his prayer. Since Shecaniah is not listed among those who were guilty of this sin later in this chapter, he most likely was simply another faithful Jew like Ezra who had great concern for the spiritual welfare of his people.

His father was Jehiel, the son of Elam. If we look ahead to the list of men who were guilty of intermarriage, we again in verse 26 find Jehiel, the son of Elam. What that means is that Shecaniah is apparently denouncing his own father here in verses 2-4!

There is a lesson here for us. I think we have all known people who have conveniently changed their view about certain sins involving marriage when family members have fallen into those sins — Shecaniah was not such a person!

In verse 2, Shecaniah expresses hope that God might refrain from judging the nation if it repented and changed its ways, which he then encourages Ezra and the people to do. Yes, Shecaniah says, we have sinned, and yes, the sin has been great (“we have trespassed against our God”), but there was still hope. It was not too late to repent and make things right with God. But how?

In verse 3, Shecaniah tells them how: “Now therefore let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives, and such as are born of them.”

The marriages were illegal, and there was one and only one solution to an illegal marriage – it must be ended. Both the foreign wives and the children from the mixed marriage must be put away, which presumably includes being sent back to where the wife had come from in the first place.

The phrase “put away” in verse 3 means divorce rather than just separation. It is the same word found in Deuteronomy 24:2 discussing divorce.

Deuteronomy 24:2 - And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife.

These marriages were sinful. Nehemiah makes that point very clear - they were a “great evil.”

Nehemiah 13:27 – Shall we then hearken unto you to do all this great evil, to transgress against our God in marrying strange wives?

To many and perhaps to most today, this solution seems very harsh. And there is a reason for that – it was very harsh, but it needed to be harsh. Why? Because something much more important was at stake.

Had the intermarriage continued, the Jewish race and the Jewish religion would have become unrecognizable in just a few generations. God had a plan for the Jews, and that plan required that they maintain their purity and their faithfulness to God’s law. This small group of Jews was surrounded by a large group of hostile, polytheistic neighbors that threatened to consume them – and that was a grave danger.

Ezra also knew the devastating problems that had come from the foreign marriages of Solomon and the kings who followed him. Drastic measures were called for in such a situation, and drastic measures were taken.

History tells us that other Jewish communities in exile gradually disintegrated. That happened, for example, to the Jews in Egypt that we have previously

discussed. This event in Ezra 9 and 10 was a watershed moment in the history of God's people.

And for those who point to the departure of the children as being excessively harsh, perhaps they should have asked the departing mothers for their opinion.

In ancient societies (as today), when marriages were dissolved, the children typically went with the mother. The harshness of that edict was directed more to the fathers, who would likely never see their children again. But sin has consequences – both then and now – and, more often than not, those consequences affect the innocent along with the guilty – both then and now.

The command in verse 3 (and again later in verse 11) is that these men divorce their illegal foreign wives.

But I thought that Malachi 2:16 tells us that God hates divorce. Why is Ezra telling these men to do something that God hates?

To answer that question, Let's look more closely at what was going on in Malachi 2.

Malachi 2:11-16 - Judah hath dealt treacherously, and an **abomination** is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah hath profaned the holiness of the LORD which he loved, **and hath married the daughter of a strange god.** 12 The LORD will cut off the man that doeth this, the master and the scholar, out of the tabernacles of Jacob, and him that offereth an offering unto the LORD of hosts. 13 And this have ye done **again**, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. 14 Yet ye say, Wherefore? **Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously:** yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. 15 And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously **against the wife of his youth.** 16 **For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away:** for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

So, yes, God hates divorce. **But the divorce God hates is the divorce from the wife on one's youth – not the divorce from the second wife.** Malachi calls these second marriages “an abomination” and says that the men involved have “profaned the holiness of the LORD” (Malachi 2:11).

Yes, God hates divorce, but Malachi is calling on these men to return to the wives of their youth. The first divorce was the **hated** divorce; the second divorce was a **commanded** divorce!

And these verses from Malachi (written about 25 years later) likely also tell us something important about the situation here in Ezra 10. Notice that Malachi 2:13 says that the people had done this thing **again**, perhaps pointing us back to the prior time they did it here in Ezra 10.

If what was happening in Malachi 2 was also happening in Ezra 10, then what does that tell us about what is happening here in Ezra 10? What it tells us is that for some and perhaps many of the men who were marrying foreign women in Ezra 10, this marriage was not their first marriage. Instead, they had divorced the wives of their youth so that they could marry these foreign women. In fact, it seems that Shecaniah's own father had divorced Shecaniah's mother so that he could marry a foreign unbeliever.

I think we see additional evidence for that conclusion in Ezra 9:2 - “And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.” Does anyone really think that the officials and chief men were single? That is very unlikely. Almost certainly, these Jewish leaders had married while young, but were now casting away their wives so that they could marry these foreign women. We know that is what was happening later in Malachi 2. I think it was also happening here in Ezra 10.

So what does that mean? What it means is that we are not looking primarily here at younger men marrying for the first time, but we are looking primarily at older men marrying for the second time. That also makes sense from the perspective of the foreign women, who were much more likely to marry an

older wealthier Jew than a younger Jewish man with neither position nor money. ‘

So, it seems that some and perhaps most of these men who were marrying foreign wives were abandoning their Jewish wives to do so. And so the complaint (still heard today) that Ezra was destroying families would have and should have fallen on deaf ears – **Ezra was not the home wrecker here!** If anything, Ezra was trying to put the homes back together.

It was a violation of the law of Moses for any Jewish man to marry a foreign unbeliever, but many here had compounded that sin by forsaking the wife of their youth to marry that foreign woman. The command in Ezra 10 was for them to divorce their foreign wives.

Yes, but the second marriages involved children, and those children would be hurt by the divorce. And on and on the excuses go.

Yes, that is exactly what sin does – sin causes heartache and grief for all involved, and often for many who are not involved. Let’s not blame that heartache and grief on God who told us not to become involved in the sin in the first place.

A man leaves his wife and his children to unlawfully marry someone else and have children with her. And that man is now complaining that God is the one causing heartache and grief? Give me a break! The heartache and the grief began as soon as that man departed from God’s law of marriage given to all of mankind.

We might pause for a moment to consider what relevance, if any, these chapters in Ezra have with regard to current questions today about marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Much could be said, but I will make just a few quick points on that issue.

First, the question often arises today about whether a remarriage without scriptural grounds should continue or should be dissolved.

Those who argue for its dissolution stress (rightfully) that one can hardly be said to have repented of a sin that one continues to engage in. If I steal a car and then become a Christian, can I keep the car? The answer is no. If restitution is possible, and you have not made restitution, then you have not repented.

Those who argue for the opposite view often say that God hates divorce, and so the marriage should continue, perhaps for the sake of the children.

First, as we just saw, the divorce God hates is the first divorce – the one that led to all of the problems in the first place.

Second, Ezra would seem to have something to tell us with regard to the view that the illegal marriages should continue for the sake of the children. That was certainly not Ezra's view!

And as for the unlawful marriage continuing for the sake of the children, I fear that sometimes (as it seems here in Ezra 10) it is a bit late and a bit too convenient to suddenly start doing things for the sake of the children! If their welfare had been paramount all along, then perhaps the first marriage would never have been dissolved.

Here in Ezra 10 some of these men were marrying and then having children with women who practiced child sacrifice! Does anyone think the welfare of the children was their chief concern?

Many sermons and lessons on divorce and remarriage have been preached and written from the pages of Ezra, and I have no problem with using Ezra as a source for those sermons and lessons, but when I read or hear such lessons I think of what Abraham told Lazarus,

Luke 16:31 – If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.

To paraphrase, I would say, "If they do not hear Jesus in Matthew 19:9, they will not be convinced by Ezra."

And what does Matthew 19:9 say?

Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery.

One has to work pretty hard to misunderstand that verse! It certainly needs no clarification from Ezra.

The problem with issues about marriage is not a lack of clarity in God's word. The problem is a lack of will to do what God has clearly commanded with regard to marriage.

And those commands are not just for Christians. God's law of marriage was given in the garden, and it applies to all people everywhere.

Continuing to address Ezra, Shecaniah says in verse 4 what every leader wants to hear: "Arise; for this matter belongeth unto thee: we also will be with thee: be of good courage, and do it." (We might want to remember this verse the next time our elders are faced with a difficult decision!)

Shecaniah recognizes the obvious – that it is the task of the leader to lead, but he tells Ezra that the people are with him. And he encourages Ezra to "be of good courage, and do it," which is good advice for leaders in any generation. We don't know whether Ezra needed this encouragement to act, but it certainly didn't hurt.

Shecaniah was a man of action who recognized the urgency and seriousness of the situation. He knew what needed to be done, and he did what he could to see that it was done. He did what was right even when that meant going against a member of his own family. He encouraged his leaders to act when action was required. We should pray that God will continue to raise up Shecaniahs!

LESSON 38

Ezra 10:5-6

5 Then arose Ezra, and made the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel, to swear that they should do according to this word. And they sware. 6 Then Ezra rose up from before the house of God, and went into the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib: and when he came thither, he did eat no bread, nor drink water: for he mourned because of the transgression of them that had been carried away.

Upon hearing the words of Shecaniah, Ezra immediately rises from his knees. And he makes “the chief priests, the Levites, and all Israel” take an oath that they would do according to the word that they had heard, and they did that.

Ezra then makes his way from one of the outer courts of the temple to the chamber of Johanan. This chamber would have been one of the many rooms of the temple complex.

Earlier we mentioned that some commentators argue that Ezra arrived **after** Nehemiah rather than before Nehemiah. Verse 6 is often quoted as their best evidence for that position.

Here is what we know:

- In 458 BC (if we maintain our current chronology), Ezra is said to have entered the chamber of Johanan the son of Eliashib (Ezra 10:6).
- In 445 BC, Eliashib is the high priest when Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 3:1, 20).
- Around 410 BC, according to the Elephantine papyri, someone named Johanan was high priest.

From this chronology it is argued that Ezra must have returned when Johanan was high priest (that is, after 410). But this argument is based on nothing but conjecture. The Biblical text simply states that Ezra made use of Johanan’s

chamber - nothing more. The text does not say that Johanan was the High Priest.

Nehemiah 12:22 tells us that Johanan was the grandson of Eliashib. Those who think Ezra arrived after Nehemiah argue that the grandson of Eliashib could not have invited Ezra to use his chamber in 458 BC, but could have done so only much later. But that argument falls apart with the simple observation that Johanan was very common name, and particularly so once it had already been used in a family. That is, since we know that Eliashib had a grandson named Johanan, it is even more likely that Eliashib had a brother or a son named Johanan. In short, there is no need to adjust our timeline.

We don't know why Ezra went to this chamber. Perhaps he wanted to enlist the support of Jehohanan. It is also possible that he wanted to confer with one of the religious leaders before progressing with his plan.

And when Ezra leaves that chamber, we see that he remains very upset by the sin of the people. He doesn't eat or drink, but instead he mourns because of the sin of those who had strayed from God's word. Ezra took sin very seriously!

So where are we at the end of verse 6?

"At this point, Ezra has torn his garments, pulled out his hair and beard, sat down, fallen on his knees, stretched out his hands, prayed, made confession, wept, prostrated himself, taken an oath, and fasted. Ezra's behavior reveals not only his love for his people, but also his hatred for sin. It should be remembered that Ezra has not even personally committed the sin over which he is in such extreme anguish. May our response be the same when we view sin in our midst today."

Ezra 10:7-8

7 And they made proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem unto all the children of the captivity, that they should gather themselves together unto Jerusalem; 8 And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.

In verse 7, a message is sent out commanding all men to appear in Jerusalem within three days for an investigation. Those who failed to do so would have their property confiscated and would be banned from the congregation.

From 7:25-26, we recall that Ezra had authority from the King to take such actions – and in fact Ezra had authority to take much more drastic actions than this. Ezra is restraining himself here! He had the full backing of the Persian government to do this, and to do much more if he wanted to do so.

The proclamation allowed the exiles three days to make their way to Jerusalem. Judah was a very small territory at this time, and Jerusalem could easily be reached within three days from any city in the region (but that three day period also included the time it took for the proclamation to reach them).

The Hebrew word translated “confiscated” or “forfeited” in verse 8 originally meant that the property would be destroyed (Joshua 6:21), but by this time it meant that the property would be delivered to the priests (Ezekiel 44:29).

Exclusion from the congregation meant that they would not be allowed in the temple and might even lose their citizenship. They would not be allowed to participate in the daily sacrifices, and they would not be able to call upon their fellow Jews for help. They would be regarded as foreigners by the Jews.

Ezra 10:9-11

9 Then all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves together unto Jerusalem within three days. It was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month; and all the people sat in the street of the house of God, trembling because of this matter, and for the great rain. 10 And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. 11 Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.

In verse 9, all the men from Judah and Benjamin gather in Jerusalem. As for Judah and Benjamin, we saw that same phrase back in 1:5, and it likely refers

to a geographical area, although most of the Jews at this time were from those two Southern tribes.

The exiles gathered in the open square in front of the temple. This square could accommodate thousands of people and was probably the only place in the city large enough to hold this gathering. It should be remembered that much of the city still lay in ruins.

The 20th day of the 9th month was in midwinter, and we see in verse 9 that the people were trembling. In the Hebrew, “the great rain” indicates that these were heavy, torrential rains. At this time of the year, the temperature could have been in the 40’s, which along with the rain explains the trembling. But verse 9 tells us that they were also trembling because of the matter that was being discussed.

“Even the weather seems to cast judgment on the people: as the people wait outside the temple, they are trembling, not just because of the gravity of the matter, but because of the heavy rain. If this is not intended as a direct sign of God’s displeasure, it is at least intended to intensify the seriousness of the situation: the Bible does not tend to report weather conditions idly.”

Clearly, the gathered men understood the significance of the occasion. Many of their lives were about to be forever changed. Many were going to lose their wives and their children. Perhaps some feared for their lives, knowing that Ezra had the authority from the King of Persia to put them to death.

The bad weather prevented a long speech, so Ezra gives a short and powerful speech – and it is amazing how much Ezra manages to say in such a short speech.

He says in verses 10-11:

“Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives.”

The speech has four key elements.

- First, Ezra accused the exiles of being unfaithful to the Lord by marrying foreign women.
- Second, Ezra explained that their personal sin had implications for the whole group; it added to the guilt of the nation. The entire nation could be exiled as a result of the sins of a few.
- Third, Ezra called on the people to repent and confess their sin to God.
- Fourth, Ezra commanded the remnant to do the will of God, namely, to separate from foreigners, especially the foreign wives.

What more needed to be said? They had broken faith with God, and they needed to restore that broken relationship. Either they would do it, or they would not. There was no need for Ezra to repeat the same message 12 different ways in a longer speech.

And what was the key to restoring that broken relationship? Verse 11 tells us – separation. Separation from the peoples of the land and separation from the foreign wives. And that is still God’s message today for his people:

2 Corinthians 6:17-18 - Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

We cannot be right with God if we refuse to separate ourselves from that which is unclean. That was true then, and that is true now.

Here in Ezra 10 what that meant was that these men had to divorce their unlawful wives.

Ezra 10:12-17

12 Then all the congregation answered and said with a loud voice, As thou hast said, so must we do. 13 But the people are many, and it is a time of much rain, and we are not able to stand without, neither is this a work of one day or two: for we are many that have transgressed in this thing. 14 Let now our rulers of all the congregation stand, and let all them which have taken strange wives in our cities come at appointed times, and with them the elders of every city, and the judges thereof, until the fierce wrath of our God for this matter be turned from us. 15 Only Jonathan the son of Asahel

and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them. 16 And the children of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain chief of the fathers, after the house of their fathers, and all of them by their names, were separated, and sat down in the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. 17 And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month.

In verses 12-13, the people agree about what needs to be done, but they have three reasons why it should not be done right now. First, there are too many people here. Second, it is raining. Third, there are too many cases to be decided.

But they also had a proposed solution for those problems, and we see that in verse 14. This shows us that they were not just trying to delay and avoid fixing the problem.

Their proposed solution was for the officials to organize things locally, and then for those affected to come to Jerusalem with their local leaders and judges. They understood that these were very delicate matters, and they wanted things to be handled fairly. Ezra apparently agrees with the proposal because this is what they do in verses 16-17.

But in between verses 12-14 and verses 16-17, we have verse 15:

Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah were employed about this matter: and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite helped them.

What does that mean? The ESV translation is clearer:

Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahzeiah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite supported them.

What we have between the problem in verses 12-14 and the solution in verses 16-17 is the opposition in verse 15! And, believe me, there will always be a verse 15 between the problem and the solution!

Verse 15 has been called “one of the most difficult verses in the whole book of Ezra.” To what do “this” and “them” refer?

The most likely interpretation is that Asahel and Jahzeiah opposed the delay – they wanted to take immediate action. But it also possible that they opposed the drastic measures, perhaps because they themselves had foreign wives. But if they were opposed to the divorces, one might expect a sharp rebuke from Ezra and the other leaders.

And what about Meshullam and Shabbethai? Which view did they support? Verse 29 might provide a clue in that Meshullam is listed among the offenders, but that was a very common name – there are perhaps as many as 10 different Meshullam’s in Ezra and Nehemiah! In short, all we can say for sure is that they were opposed to something – which is probably all we need to say.

The process begins on the first day of the tenth month and ends on the first day of the first month – which is about 75 days.

Ezra selected leaders from each family who were responsible for identifying those members of their families who had participated in the sin of intermarriage. The list of these leaders is not provided, which one commentary describes as a somewhat peculiar omission in a book noted for its fondness for lists.

These leaders and the guilty parties would travel to Jerusalem to have their situations investigated by the national leadership, which would then offer its decision.

Assuming that the list is complete, a total of 113 Jews had married foreign women. Given that it took 75 days, that means they dealt with fewer than two cases a day on average. Why so few?

First, they were complicated matters, and the people had been told to come to Jerusalem in an organized manner.

Second, some may have been found innocent, which means their cases might not have been listed in verses 18-44.

Third, it is possible that not all the cases were listed in verses 18-44, so they may have dealt with many more cases.

Were some of the women allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some of them had or were willing to convert to Judaism.

Were some of the children allowed to stay? Possibly. Perhaps some were unwanted by the mothers or would have been in danger had they returned. (Remember these were racially mixed children being returned, in some cases, to a people who practiced child sacrifice.)

We aren't told whether some were allowed to stay, but we are told that these decisions were made through a slow, deliberative process. This was not a case where the women and children were just all shown the door and told to get out.

And, perhaps not surprisingly, the book of Ezra ends with a long list of difficult to pronounce names!

Ezra 10:18-43

18 And among the sons of the priests there were found that had taken strange wives: namely, of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren; Maaseiah, and Eliezer, and Jarib, and Gedaliah. 19 And they gave their hands that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they offered a ram of the flock for their trespass. 20 And of the sons of Immer; Hanani, and Zebadiah. 21 And of the sons of Harim; Maaseiah, and Elijah, and Shemaiah, and Jehiel, and Uziah. 22 And of the sons of Pashur; Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethaneel, Jozabad, and Elasa. 23 Also of the Levites; Jozabad, and Shimei, and Kelaiah, (the same is Kelita,) Pethahiah, Judah, and Eliezer. 24 Of the singers also; Eliashib: and of the porters; Shallum, and Telem, and Uri. 25 Moreover of Israel: of the sons of Parosh; Ramiah, and Jeziah, and Malchiah, and Miamin, and Eleazar, and Malchijah, and Benaiah. 26 And of the sons of Elam; Mattaniah, Zechariah, and Jehiel, and Abdi, and Jeremoth, and Eliah. 27 And of the sons of Zattu; Elioenai, Eliashib, Mattaniah, and Jeremoth, and Zabad, and Aziza. 28 Of the sons also of Bebai; Jehohanan, Hananiah, Zabbai, and Athlai. 29 And of the sons of Bani; Meshullam, Malluch, and Adaiah, Jashub, and Sheal, and Ramoth. 30 And of the sons of Pahathmoab; Adna, and Chelal, Benaiah, Maaseiah, Mattaniah, Bezaleel, and Binnui, and Manasseh. 31 And of the sons of Harim; Eliezer, Ishijah, Malchiah, Shemaiah, Shimeon, 32 Benjamin,

Malluch, and Shemariah. 33 Of the sons of Hashum; Mattenai, Mattathah, Zabad, Eliphelet, Jeremai, Manasseh, and Shimei. 34 Of the sons of Bani; Maadai, Amram, and Uel, 35 Benaiah, Bedeiah, Chelluh, 36 Vaniah, Meremoth, Eliashib, 37 Mattaniah, Mattenai, and Jaasau, 38 And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei, 39 And Shelemiah, and Nathan, and Adaiah, 40 Machnadebai, Shashai, Sharai, 41 Azareel, and Shelemiah, Shemariah, 42 Shallum, Amariah, and Joseph. 43 Of the sons of Nebo; Jeiel, Mattithiah, Zabad, Zebina, Jadau, and Joel, Benaiah.

The book of Ezra ends with what has been called a list of shame – a list of those who had married foreign wives in violation of the law of God. But it may also be a list of the repentant because it seems that most and perhaps all of these men sent their foreign wives and children away.

As usual, when we find a long list of names in the Bible, we should ask why we have this list. Why did Ezra give us all of the specific names? Was he trying to shame or embarrass these men?

One reason we have the specific names, I think, is the same reason we have seen before - this list is a reminder that these were real people! This was not some hypothetical problem that Ezra the scribe considered in his ivory tower. This was a real problem that involved real people.

There are 113 men on this list who were guilty of foreign marriages. For each of them, we also had the foreign wife and the children with the foreign wife. And, as we have seen, it is very likely that for many of these 113 men there was also a first wife and children with the first wife.

Jehiel in verse 26 is a good example. He was the father of Schechaniah from verse 2, which means that he had a first wife with children, and verse 26 tells us he also had a foreign wife.

Think of the heartache involved in the divorce from the wife of his youth, both on his wife and on his children. And then think of the heartache on them when he rushes off to marry the unbelieving foreigner. And then think of the heartache when he is commanded to divorce her and send her and his children with her away forever. And then multiply that heartache by 113. And we should also add in the heartache of the parents of these men, noticing that

Ezra gives us their family names in this list. These were real people, and this was real heartache. These names remind us of that fact. Sin creates heartache all around!

And I think there is another reason here as well - these names serve as a warning, both to these men and to others. This sin was serious - so serious that it threatened to derail God's plan of redemption. And I think that was one reason why Ezra named names here. He was not going to sweep this under the rug - even though most of these offenders were prominent men. It was important for everyone to see what had happened and who had done it. Perhaps this would keep these men from offending again, while encouraging others not to commit this sin in the first place.

As for the names themselves, we have already noted Jehiel in verse 26 and his connection with Shechaniah in verse 2. Other than that, the commentaries don't have much to say about the other names. I think the lesson of this list comes from the fact that we have the names rather than the specific names themselves (except for Jehiel).

The wording of verse 38 is a problem. The KJV has, "And Bani, and Binnui, Shimei." The ESV has, "Of the sons of Binnui: Shimei," which comes from a slight adjustment of the vowels. We don't know for sure which is correct, but the modern view favors the latter.

We can also learn something about the order of this list.

The list begins with a record of the religious leaders who were guilty of intermarriage. The roster includes 17 priests and 10 Levites, together making up almost one-fourth of the total.

The priests are listed first, showing that the sin reached even to the highest ranks of the spiritual leaders. In fact, the family of the high priest Jeshua begins the list. Clearly, there was no attempt by Ezra to suppress the guilt of his fellow priests.

“Where we might have expected some cover-up of priestly guilt, this catalog goes out of its way to give it prominence, with true biblical candor, by reversing the order followed in Chapter 2.”

The priests guilty of the sin of intermarriage made a pledge to put away their wives. The phrase “gave their hands” in verse 19 was a common way of confirming an agreement.

These priests also offered a ram as a guilt offering for their offense. And notice that the ram offering did not mean they could then keep their illegal wives!

The pledge and the guilt offering in verse 19 are mentioned only for the priests. If they were the only ones who made this offering, then it may have been because their transgression was worse due to their position. But a more likely explanation is that verse 19 was the example that all the rest also followed, but the description was simply not repeated over and over again in the text for each group.

The temple servants were not mentioned. Perhaps they were too numerous to list, which would also answer our earlier question about the small number of cases. Or perhaps this problem was one that affected only the higher social classes – those with money who could attract the attention of the foreign women.

After listing the priests and the Levites, verse 25 begins the list of those “of Israel.” Sometimes Israel is used in this book to refer to all the people (priests and Levites included), and sometimes (as here) it is used to refer to people other than the priests and the Levites. Four of the families mentioned here do not also occur in the list of earlier returnees found in Ezra 2.

There are no women included in this list. It is possible that no Jewish woman married a foreigner. However, the command of Nehemiah, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons” (Nehemiah 13:25), given less than twenty years later, indicates that the practice seems to have been at least known, if not common, in his day. It is more likely no such Jewish women are mentioned

here because those women had already left the group to live with their foreign husbands.

Ezra 10:44

44 All these had taken strange wives: and some of them had wives by whom they had children.

Verse 44 is an unusual ending, and there may have been some corruption from the original text. Literally the verse reads: “and there are of them women, and they [masculine] appointed sons.”

The KJV and the ESV both have verse 44 say simply that these men were guilty of the sin in question, and that some of them also had children by their foreign wife.

The RSV goes a step further: “All these had married foreign women, and they put them away with their children.” That is, the RSV translates the verse so that it says these all of these men did what had been proposed back in verse 3.

The text is difficult, and we can’t know for sure which view is correct.

But one thing we can say for sure about verse 44 is that it is definitely abrupt.

“The narrator seems to walk off stage with the last of the women and children, leaving the reader contemplating the significance of the final scene.”

But is verse 44 really the last word from Ezra? No. He will disappear from the written record for about 13 years, but we see Ezra again in Nehemiah 8 sometime after Nehemiah’s arrival in 445 BC – and we see Ezra, in this same city square, still reading the Law, still doing the Law, and still teaching the Law! If you are looking for an example of faithfulness, godliness, commitment, and integrity, you won’t do much better than Ezra.

But, sadly, Ezra’s reforms here did not last very long. Nehemiah 13:23-28 reveals that this same apostasy was present when Nehemiah returned from

his trip to Persia around 430 BC, roughly 30 years after this time. Malachi would also preach against it.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are a single book, but our study of Ezra must end here (at least for now!).

What great themes have we seen in Ezra and Esther? (1) The Law (The Written Word), (2) The Temple (Proper Worship), (3) The Wall (Separation and Purity), (4) Reversal (God's Plan of Redemption), (5) Restoration (back to the blueprint!), (6) The Remnant (which, today, is the church), and (7) God's Providence.

Thank you!

E. Hall (2023-09-10)